

THE DRAMATIC LANDSCAPE:
ARTICULATING DESIGN CRITERIA FOR OUTDOOR THEATER SPACES

by

JOANNE CAROLE MENDENHALL

(Under the Direction of Shelley Cannady)

ABSTRACT

This thesis takes a look at current and past design practices for performance landscapes and combines them with the professional needs of community theater groups in order to generate design criteria for small scale outdoor theaters. The last book written on how to design outdoor spaces specifically for theatrical use was completed almost a century ago, and it is time for an updated manual. A literature review on indoor and outdoor theater design practices, case studies and stakeholder interviews are used in this study. The final design criteria looks at requirements for the theater landscape in regard to audience experience, promoting interaction between the performer and audience, audience comfort, lighting, acoustics, and technical requirements of the theater professional.

INDEX WORDS: Outdoor theaters, Theater design, Outdoor community theater, Landscape architect and theater, Performance landscape, Theater landscape

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DEDICATION

To my mother, for opening the door to the arts for me.

To my father, for always encouraging me to go through open doors, even if I can't see
what's on the other side.

You two are my strength. Thank you for loving me.

And to Prof. William L. Ramsey Jr.

You, Sir, are a true mentor. Thank you for supporting this project and for taking an
interest in me.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“Being in a theater is like being in a church...it’s a sacred space.”

~Kathleen Hogan~

Problem & Research Question

Theaters have a sense of place that is uniquely their own. It is a rare mix of dark, even eerie, and yet slightly magical energy that does not exist anywhere else. Some theater lovers say this feeling is created by ghosts. No. Ghost is the wrong term. *Echo* is more accurate. Some believe that theaters contain echoes of things that were brought to life on the stage and choose not to disappear simply because the audience and actors went home.

Whether the belief in echoes is accurate or not, the unique ambiance of theater spaces makes them an aspect of design worth studying. One area of theater design that has been neglected in literature for almost a century is the outdoor theater. The last book published on how to design a theater landscape, F. Waugh’s *Outdoor Theaters: the Design, Construction and Use of Open-Air Auditoriums*, was originally released in 1917 (it has since been reprinted numerous times, the latest of which was 2010). While the book is very thorough, it comes from a time where electric lights were still new, and where the opportunities to design outdoor theaters were largely on private land or at

universities. It is time for a more current articulation of design criteria for the theater landscape.

This thesis seeks to discern the gaps between current design practices for general performance landscapes and the professional needs for community theater groups in order to generate a set of current design criteria for small scale theater landscapes.

In today's world, performance landscapes can be found in different settings. I use the term performance landscape here because many current spaces of this nature are meant to accommodate several different types of performances (i.e. music, dance, art installations, etc.), not just those that are theatrical in nature. These multi-purpose performance spaces can still be found in academic settings like Lafayette College's Art Plaza in Easton, PA, but they have also moved into the more public and semi-public areas such as the Southern Company Amphitheater in Atlanta, GA's, Centennial Park, downtown revitalization projects like that of Fairburn, GA, and even a mid-block pass between buildings in New York City called Anita's Way. On the surface, creating spaces to accommodate multiple performance types may seem simple since the basic needs are similar (audience accommodations, a stage area, etc.). However, each activity has a slightly different set of needs that its performance space must accommodate. For example, musicians need to hear themselves to make sure they are on pitch and so their spaces should have an slight echo, whereas "speech requires fine definition... (which) means the sound should stop after it reaches the listener" (Burriss-Meyer, & Goodfriend, 1957, p.61). Consequently, when a theater group wishes to use a multi-purpose landscape for a performance, it often has to rent equipment and spend additional time on set-up to make the space functional. In an interview with Joelle Re'Arp-Dunham, the Co-Founder

and Artistic Director for Circle Ensemble Theatre Company in Athens, GA, she revealed that her group often rents booms, lights, cables, and a lighting board for outdoor evening performances because the existing lighting is either inadequate or non-existent (interview, Feb. 10, 2012). The group has to rely on private donations in order to afford the additional technical support needed for an outdoor evening performance.

Definitions

The term theater landscape refers to outdoor or open-air spaces designed specifically for theatrical use. In contrast, the term performance landscape is used when referring to outdoor spaces meant to accommodate multiple types of performing arts (music, dance, art installations, etc.). An outdoor theater is one that is located completely outside, while an open-air theater (like Shakespeare's Globe Theater in London, England) is one that is open to the elements, but enclosed within a walled structure and not easily accessible to the surrounding public.

When using the term community theater, I am referring to theater groups attached to a specific community. The cast and crew that make up these groups live and perform locally. While the term is not indicative of the size of the company or of its financial success, often community theater groups are non-profit businesses with a limited budget. It is not uncommon for a community theater group to have an indoor theater 'home', but it is also not uncommon for them to rent and use performance landscapes or 'found spaces' (spaces not originally designed for theatrical use). An example of this can be found at Ashford Manor, an 1893 Victorian manor house turned bed and breakfast in Watkinsville, GA. To generate extra revenue during the summer months, the owners began to host a ten show summer concert series by installing a stage at the bottom of the

estate's terraced backyard. The venue has also been used for Rose of Athens Theatre Company's Shakespeare on the Lawn series and was the location of the Circle Ensemble Theatre Company's 2011 production of *Metamorphoses*.

Project Scope

This thesis is intended to take a focused look at the needs of small scale outdoor community theater landscapes. According to George Contini, an Associate Professor in the University of Georgia's Department of Theater and Film Studies in Athens, GA, such landscapes are most often used for Shakespearian productions, musicals, or historical dramas during the summer months (interview, Feb. 23, 2012). There are four important distinctions to the type of spaces that will be looked at in this study.

First, the specific functional activity that the design criteria will address is *theater* performance. While the current trend is to design spaces that accommodate a range of activities, each activity has a unique set of requirements. In order to create true multi-purpose performance spaces, the designer must understand the needs of each individual activity. This thesis takes the first step in creating that understanding by looking at the specialized needs of theater. A secondary goal of this thesis is to inspire others to take an in-depth look at the other types of performance art and their specific needs.

Second, the final design criteria of this study are meant to support the creation of small scale spaces. For theater, a small scale venue can generally accommodate an audience of approximately 200 people (Elder et al., 1979). The larger spaces have a different set of issues, particularly when dealing with acoustics. This is not to say that some of the issues being discussed will not also apply to the larger spaces, but the focus of this study is on smaller landscapes.

Third, this project will focus on design criteria for warm climates like that of Georgia, although the case studies looked at are located as far north as New York City. While one may find outdoor performing spaces in cold climates, the time frame of yearly functional use for such landscapes would be short and perhaps not the best use of public space.

Fourth, the assumption is made that those installing and using these spaces are on a limited budget. An attempt is made to clearly define essential versus non-essential (but helpful) design elements.

Research Methods

A literature review on indoor and outdoor theater design practices, four case studies and twenty-five stakeholder interviews were used to generate design criteria for small scale outdoor community theater landscapes. The research findings are presented in five distinct sections. The second chapter will deal with the value of theater landscapes and address the question of why a landscape architect should be cognizant of an outdoor theater's functional needs. An examination of the unique qualities, opportunities and uses of outdoor theater spaces will also be looked at in this chapter.

The third chapter will take a brief look at the historical background of outdoor and open-air theaters in Europe. The history of theater has been the focus of many lengthy books and could easily take up an entire thesis. However, this particular section will be a quick overview of historical high points in regard to spatial patterns in Western theatrical traditions and will provide a context for the current state of performance landscape design practices in the U.S.

The fourth chapter discusses the primary and secondary theater space requirements of community theater professionals. Information in this chapter was gathered through literature on indoor and outdoor theater design and through a series of stakeholder interviews with professionals in the field. The chapter starts by defining basic terminology that may be useful to designers not familiar with the theater industry. The subsequent chapter sections deal with the key areas of theater design as identified by the interviews and literature.

The fifth chapter looks at the current design practices for performance landscapes. As the literature on current design practices is limited, four case studies will be examined to determine the current design theory in regard to these spaces. Two are functional theater landscapes that are over fifty years-old, one is a multi-use space located in a public/urban location, and one is a multi-use space attached to an academic institution. I visited each site and (where possible) interviewed the designers and users of the spaces.

The final chapter combines the professional requirements of community theater groups with current design practices in order to generate general design criteria to guide designers in creating a range of theater landscapes.

Limitations

When generating design criteria, there are limitations as to what undesirable site characteristics can and cannot be mitigated by design. There are potential problems in true outdoor theaters that cannot be completely eliminated (such as exposure to the elements, noise distractions, and wildlife) without turning the space into an indoor theater. There are better and worse approaches for mitigating these issues, but a theatrical landscape is not necessarily a failure if it does not completely fix each issue.

There are also limits on the types of shows that these spaces can accommodate. Some professionals believe that only the classic Shakespeare or Greek plays are suited to small scale outdoor theater because these plays were created without scenery in mind (Waugh, 1917). It could be argued that any character based play that does not require elaborate set changes or major technical support would also be suited to outdoor performances. However, it is not expected that a Broadway spectacular such as *Phantom of the Opera* would take place in a small scale outdoor theater landscape. The technical needs for such a show are complex and require a major amount of infrastructure that is better suited to a controlled indoor environment.

While the goal of the articulated design criteria would be to guide the creation of spaces that can support theatrical performances without the *need* for outside equipment, it is still possible (and even likely) that certain productions will require specialized equipment to be brought into the venue. Each new show will have a different setting and tone, and so it is up to the theater company to decide what equipment it needs in order to create the desired atmosphere. A good theater space does not necessarily provide all of the equipment for every play, but it has the ability to support the equipment if a theater company wishes to use it (Kent, 2010). Any specialized needs for an individual production will still be the responsibility of the individual theater company.

Guiding Premises

I am one of the lucky few who have been exposed to the performing arts since youth. Several times a year my mother made it a point to take the whole family to the theater, the symphony or the ballet. I was in 4th grade the first time I performed in a children's community theater production: I was Maria in the *Sound of Music*. Since then,

I have been involved in about 20 productions of varying sizes and have taken several university level courses in theater.

My experiences with theater allowed me to develop a number of positive qualities: confidence, the ability to speak in public comfortably, an appreciation for seeing projects to completion, and an active imagination. Most importantly, theater gave me a sense of community growing up and has led to a number of lasting friendships. I firmly believe that the performing arts are important to a healthy society and that theater, in particular, is an activity that community designers should be promoting. I also believe that theaters are unique facilities that have the potential to inspire both human imagination and social engagement. I believe that knowing how to design a theater landscape can be beneficial to designing any landscape, whether it functions as performance space or not. As Laurence Halprin pointed out when writing about his Portland Open Space Sequence, the spaces that a landscape architect designs are “as much a theatre where events can occur as is a more formalized theatrical environment.” (Halprin, 1969, p. 58). Landscape architects set the stage for real life to happen...but with the appropriate design criteria, they can also set the stage for theatrical magic to happen.

CHAPTER 2

The Value of Outdoor Performance Spaces

Value of Theater

When arguing the value of a space, one cannot ignore the value of the activity supported by that space. Theater's value lies in its ability to foster social interactions, teach important life skills, and create a sense of community.

The successful production of a theatrical event is a group effort between many different factions: actors, director, technical staff, business staff, etc. In my experience, when the voluntary cooperation of these groups leads to a successful outcome it builds a shared sense of accomplishment and community. Participation in theater also helps individuals develop a wide range of skills. One unique skill that educators value is that of text interpretation (Bailin, 2001); other skills such as event planning, verbal and non-verbal communication skills, advertising, sewing, woodworking, three-dimensional design, etc., can also be learned while producing a theatrical event.

But it is not just the theater participant that receives social benefits. In a study to "examine the nature of communal consumption in the context of audience experience of the performing arts" (O'Sullivan, 2009, p. 209), T. O'Sullivan conducted focus group discussions with symphony audience members. He discovered that participants had a tendency to believe that the performance attending experience was highly individualistic and not a social activity. However, further questions about their attendance habits

revealed several social experience indicators. O'Sullivan related these indicators back to a study done by A. Muniz Jr. and T. O'Guinn who identified three essential characteristics of community, all of which O'Sullivan could identify in the responses of his focus group attendees: shared consciousness or a shared belonging to an event, rituals and traditions (such as clapping at the end of a performance), and a sense of moral responsibility (refraining from talking so that others may also enjoy the performance) (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The first characteristic, shared consciousness, is a particularly distinctive facet of performance art attendance. Not only are the members of the audience seeing a particular show together, they are sharing in an event that no one else on the planet has ever or will ever again experience (Jones, 1969). Even if the same cast is performing the same show the next night, because it is a live event, it will never be exactly the same. Ultimately, O'Sullivan concluded that performance art attendance creates a unique and complex communal experience (O'Sullivan, 2009). This may be why the classic Greek amphitheaters were designed to seat an entire city (Cheney, 1918); to insure the whole community shared in an identical event. It may also be why social psychologists have found that humans receive more happiness from spending money on experiences than on items (Van Boven, 2003); because an experience can be both individualistic and community affirming.

Unique Qualities of Outdoor Theater

Having established a value for theater as an activity, it is time to move on to the value of outdoor theater in particular. Why is it important to have outdoor spaces that accommodate performance? What value can be found in outdoor theaters that indoor ones

cannot offer? These are important questions to a designer because creating a successful theater starts by developing a sense of what will make the site unique (Elder et al., 1979).

In attempting to understand outdoor theaters' distinctive qualities it is best to begin by looking at the different types of experiences supported by indoor performance spaces in comparison to the experiences found in outdoor venues. The designer should be aware of these differences and look to enhance the unique virtues that an outdoor theater can offer rather than attempting to mimic an indoor setting.

One perceived difference between indoor and outdoor venues is comfort level of the audience. Indoor theaters are generally thought to be more comfortable. After all, outdoor theaters do not have temperature controls, do have insects and are subject to environmental conditions such as rain, wind and extreme heat. Audience comfort has always been an issue with outdoor venues; as early as the first Roman Empire, amphitheater designers were using awnings to protect important audience members from the sun (Cheney, 1918). Theatrical events can last anywhere from twenty minutes to three hours and so comfort is an important quality. While indoor theaters may make it easier to insure audience comfort, there is no reason to assume that an outdoor theater *has* to be uncomfortable. Careful attention by a designer to details like micro-climate and seating can insure that an outdoor audience is reasonably accommodated.

Audience comfort itself may have encouraged theaters to move inside (Mason, 1992), but ultimately what an indoor theater provides is almost complete control of the performance space. This makes it possible for the theater company to literally close the door on the real world and create a total illusion for its audience (Mason, 1992). Indoor theater is about taking the audience out of reality, something that can be a problem with

outdoor theaters that are subject to the distractions of the world around them (children playing, road noise, etc.). It would be difficult to provide complete escapism in an outdoor theater, although not all professionals view this as a downside to outdoor venues. Dr. Suzanne Westfall, a Professor at Lafayette College's Theater Department in Easton, PA, has observed that audience members who are to some degree aware of the real world are more likely to mentally engage in the performance rather than just passively observe (interview, March 2, 2012).

So what does an outdoor theater provide that an indoor one would not? First, an outdoor theater provides the performer with a flexibility that is difficult in a structured indoor setting. "What is important about outdoor theatre is not that it has no roof over it...but that it is away from the pre-defined structure of a theatre building. (The theatrical space) has to be reinvented..." (Mason, 1992, p.3). This flexibility provides opportunities for actions and effects that are difficult indoors. The outdoor theater provides panoramic views on a scale not possible in an indoor theater (Payne, 1993). Outdoor theaters also provide the opportunity to use nature as scenery. In our interview J. Re'Arp-Dunham from Athens GA's Circle Ensemble Theatre Company, pointed out that a theater company can use fire in an outdoor space without supervision, while an indoor theater would need a fire marshal present (interview, Feb. 10, 2012). Mr. Contini from the University of Georgia in Athens, GA, mentioned that it is also easier to use large animals, like horses, in an outdoor setting (interview, Feb. 23, 2012). However, Richard Dunham, the Head of Design Area and Production Coordinator for the University of Georgia's Department of Theater and Film Studies in Athens, GA, alleged that the flexibility of an

outdoor space often creates difficulties for a show's technical support team (interview, Feb. 15, 2012).

Another unique quality of outdoor theater, particularly on the small scale, lies in its opportunity to blur the lines between performer and audience (Mason, 1992). The less structured setting of an outdoor performance creates the possibility to start a two way conversation. This may be why, historically, outdoor performance areas are spaces where political debates and social commentary occur (Cohen & Greenwood, 1981). While the choice to take advantage of this opportunity is up to the theater company itself, it is a potential facet the designer can choose to support or hinder when creating the space.

Differences can also be found in the type of theater attendee. When performances take place outside, particularly in public or semi-public spaces, it gives those who would not normally visit a formal theatrical event a chance to experience the art form. For example, G. Contini has observed that outdoor performances tend to attract families with small children who might feel uncomfortable in an indoor theater (Interview, Feb. 23, 2012).

Finally, there is value to the 'romance' of attending an outdoor theatrical event and the potential to increase the public's appreciation of outdoor places (Cheney, 1918). Outdoor spaces are not just physical locations; they are ideas that evoke mental images. Maintained landscapes in particular have long been associated with paradise in the human mind (Francis & Hester, 1990). This may be why advertising 'Shakespeare in the Park' and 'Under the Stars' events have proven to be an effective marketing strategy. As Charles Massey, the Director of Marketing for The Lost Colony Theater Company in Manteo, NC, explained, attending a theater performance is an *experience* and an outdoor

theater provides a distinctive and often romanticized setting for this *experience* (interview, Feb. 29, 2012).

Economics

There are indications that theatrical events can be economically beneficial to a surrounding community. When businesses look at moving to a new location, one of the factors they take into account is the demographics of the surrounding population (Larsen, 2003). They wish to know how many potential customers are in the area. Art performances attract large groups of people into a neighborhood. According to Lance Culpepper, the Production Coordinator for The Lost Colony Theatre Company in Manteo, NC, a normal evening for The Lost Colony pulls in an audience of 700 people (interview, Feb. 29, 2012). While this study examines design criteria for small theater landscapes, 200 potential new clients coming to an area on a regular basis is noteworthy. Many business decision makers also know that there is a direct correlation between the amount of time a potential customer spends in an area and the amount of money he/she is likely to spend while there (Newman, 2007). A decent theatrical performance puts audience members in a good mood. They linger, often wishing to discuss what they have just seen and may choose to have dinner in a nearby restaurant or do a little shopping after the show. This is good for the local economy.

In addition to the potential increased revenue for the local economy, it should also be noted that with the help of government grants and capital campaigns many theater companies are able to break even and will often employ members of the community.

However, a positive view of the theater's economic value to the community is not shared by everyone. One of the documented complaints business owners voice is that a

performance clears out business establishments while a show is going on and then causes sidewalk congestion when the performance ends, making it difficult for any potential customers to enter their stores (Whyte, 2001). There is also the potential problem with parking issues. This is particularly true for areas where performances are rare and appropriate infrastructure has not been installed. The lack of parking keeps non-theater attendees from shopping in nearby stores on the days of performances.

The Landscape Architect's Role

The opportunities to design theater landscapes are growing. Cities like Fairburn and Duluth, GA, are including outdoor performance landscapes in their downtown revitalization projects in an attempt to add back 'community space'. Universities with theater and music colleges, such as Concordia University Wisconsin in Mequon, WI, and New World Symphony in Miami Beach, FL, are including amphitheaters in their campus redesigns. Even less traditional performance venues, such as the Ashford Manor Inn in Watkinsville, GA have installed performance accommodations in order to generate extra revenue in the summer months. This could be a profitable niche market for landscape architects.

Performance landscapes are outdoor spaces. Working with natural elements and knowing how to make humans comfortable in a landscape is the particular specialty of a landscape architect. The profession places a high value on "social interaction, recreation, aesthetics and enjoyment of the outdoor environment" (ERIN Research Inc., 2010, p. 6) all of which would add value to a theatrical landscape. A landscape architect's unique understanding of how to create opportunities for choice and chance in outdoor spatial experiences provides a basis to produce first-rate outdoor theater experiences. And while

the term 'outdoor performance space' may evoke elaborate images of band shells and speaker systems for many individuals, the needs of performance spaces are not significantly different from the average outdoor public plaza: comfortable seating, attention to microclimate, creation of a 'sense of place' and consideration of lighting (both natural and artificial). A performance space can be as simple as a tree stump, if the plaza that surrounds it is designed with care.

Summary

There are many good reasons to promote the opportunity for theater in a community. Children and adults alike can benefit from the skills learned by participating in a theatrical production. Theater audience members benefit from an experience that is both individualistic and community affirming. Outdoor theater provides a distinctive setting for a theatrical experience, offers an opportunity for audience-performer interaction, and may make theater accessible to parts of the population that would not normally attend a formal indoor performance. Community businesses are likely to see a monetary benefit from theater attendees. At the very least, outdoor theater encourages individuals to spend time outside and meet/interact with (and very likely sit next to) their neighbors. Theater landscapes are outdoor spaces and, as professional designers of outdoor spaces, landscape architects have the potential to produce a high-quality experience for the outdoor theater attendee.

CHAPTER 3

A Brief History of Western Outdoor Performance Spaces

Greek Amphitheaters (500 - 250 BCE)

Evidence of permanent theater space begins in fifth century BCE Greece (Hartnoll, 1968). In his book, *The Open-Air Theater*, S. Cheney explains that Greek theater started as part of a religious ceremony for the Greek god Dionysus. The chorus, a group that would sing and dance around the religious alter, was the most important component of the performance. As a result, a large full circle space in front of the stage was designated for the chorus's use and served as the audience's focal point. At first, the alter itself served as a stage with one actor standing upon it, but later the stage became a narrow platform behind the chorus made of tamped earth. According to the Roman architect Vitruvius, the height of the Greek stage was between ten and twelve feet, with a depth of ten feet, but the reasoning behind these dimensions is unknown. Behind the stage was an area for the actor to rest or change costume. Popular opinion is that the backstage space, known as the *skene*, originally started as a tent, and later developed into a rectangular building. Because the knowledge of Greek amphitheater design is almost entirely from archeological excavation and most Greek amphitheaters were constructed of wood, there is some disagreement as to whether the *skene* was actually a building or if it was simply a wall. Whether it was a building or a wall, the *skene* is known to have had

a simple temple-like façade that provided a backdrop to the stage's actions and three to five doorways that separated front and backstage areas (Cheney, 1918).

The first Greek amphitheater (and the site considered to be the birth place of drama) is the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens, Greece (Fig. 3.1). The original festival became an annual event which included a play writing competition and the Theatre of Dionysus's configuration slowly developed to support the contest. At first, the audience would sit on the bare hillside or would bring in temporary benches for each performance. After an incident in 499 BCE where the temporary wooden benches collapsed, injuring and killing several members of the audience, permanent seating was installed (made first of wood and later of stone and marble). The seating was divided vertically by fourteen passageways (creating thirteen wedges) and divided in half laterally by one passageway that was wide enough to accommodate road traffic when the theater was not in use. The theater could accommodate up to 17,000 audience members (Cheney, 1918).

The Theatre of Dionysus provided a template for the many other Greek amphitheaters that were built across Greece and in Greece's permanent colonies. Classic Greek amphitheaters were almost always carved out of a hollow hillside with seating in a horseshoe shape that focused on the chorus's circle (Hartnoll, 1968). The bowl created by this practice gave these amphitheaters amazing acoustics. G. Contini from the University of Georgia in Athens, GA, experienced this when he visited the amphitheater in Epidaurus; he discovered that an actor could literally whisper onstage and still be heard in the back row (Interview, Feb. 23, 2012). This fact is particularly impressive because Greek amphitheaters were created to accommodate anywhere from 17,000 to

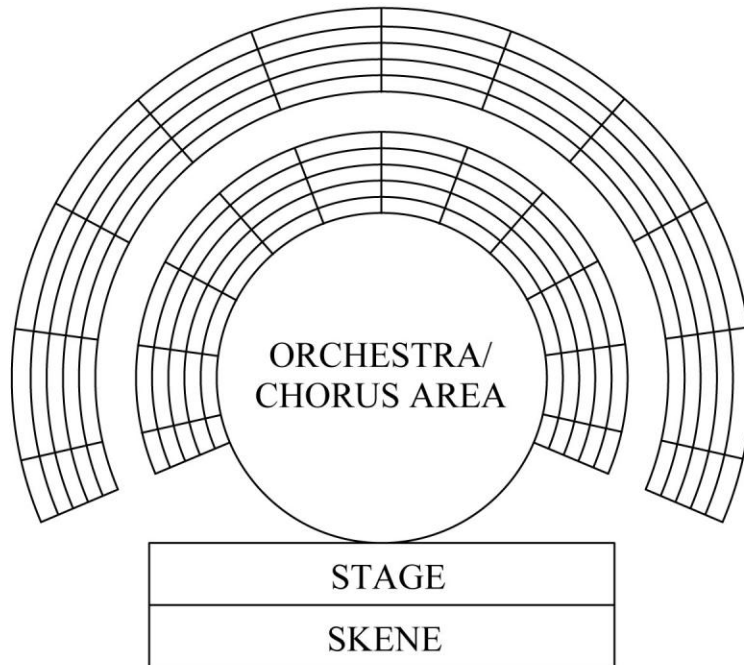


Fig. 3.1: Classic Greek Amphitheater - Site Plan
(Cheney, 1918)

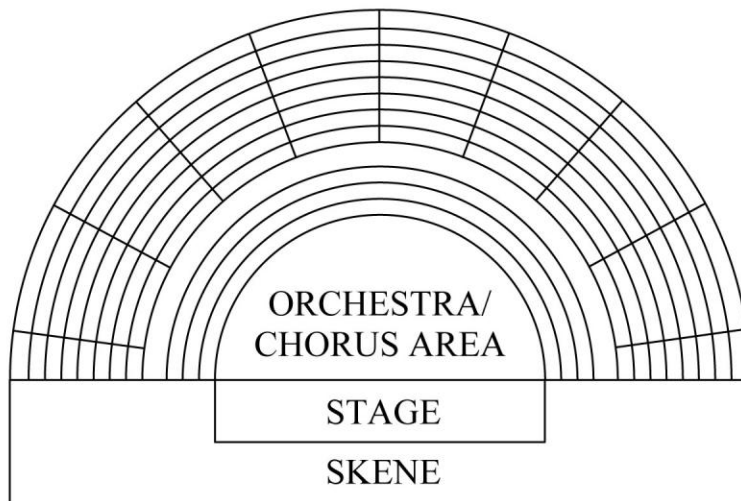


Fig. 3.2: Classic Roman Amphitheater - Site Plan
(Cheney, 1918)

50,000 people (Cheney, 1981). Because theatrical events were tied to religious ceremonies, attendance was mandatory and adequate seating to accommodate a whole city at one time was installed (Sporre & Burroughs 1990).

Roman Amphitheaters (55 BCE - 476 CE)

The Romans started to build their own permanent amphitheaters around 55 BCE (Sporre & Burroughs 1990). While the overall shape of the Roman amphitheater (Fig. 3.2) resembles that of the Greek amphitheater, there are several key differences. Most of these differences can be traced back to the fact that Roman theatrical events gradually moved away from religious themes and became more about comedy and entertainment (Hartnoll, 1968). As the plays grew less religious in nature, the chorus became less important and so its space turned into a smaller semi-circle (Cheney, 1918). For the first time, the stage became the focal point of the theater space (Hartnoll, 1968). The Romans were the first to incorporate a roof over the stage to protect the actors from the elements (Hartnoll, 1968). As it was now the focus, the stage became wider (approximately twenty feet) and taller (often twelve feet high) so that those in the back rows could see the actors (Sporre & Burroughs, 1990). Government officials and other important individuals were allowed to sit in the rows closest to the stage and were often provided with an awning to protect them from the sun (Cheney, 1918). The *skene's* façade became far more elaborate, often including sculptures, statuary and elaborate columns two and three stories high (Cheney, 1918). Historians believe that the Roman's theater spaces grew more ornate and the humor within the plays more bawdy in order to compensate for a lack of substance in their narratives. Roman plays were better known for using crude

humor and scantily clad actors than for intricate plots and compelling messages (Hartnoll, 1968).

Unlike the Greeks, the Romans built theater spaces on flat ground and surrounded the theater with a wall (Hartnoll, 1968). Roman amphitheaters were smaller, held fewer individuals and were not open to the general public. Government regulations strictly controlled access to artistic events; although there were still a few times a year when everyone was allowed to attend religious based performances (Sporre & Burroughs 1990). The rules and regulations that prevented the lower classes from enjoying professional theater may be why street performers (often with political messages) became popular during the Roman Empire (Cohen & Greenwood, 1981). These performers would set up in the *compita*, the crossroads between housing areas where people of the day would meet and interact with their neighbors (Cohen & Greenwood, 1981).

Medieval Mystery and Pageant Wagon Plays (1200 - 1600 CE)

The fall of Rome (476 CE) disrupted the development of theater spaces in Europe. It is believed that plays continued to be performed by traveling actors in temporary locations throughout the dark ages, but little is written on the design of such spaces (Hartnoll, 1968).

During the thirteenth century, mystery plays (dramatizations of church approved scripture stories) emerged as a way for the Roman Catholic Church to communicate with followers who were unable to read the Bible (Cheney, 1918). These plays were originally performed at different locations within the church itself, but the audience eventually outgrew the church space and the plays were moved to the outdoors (Hartnoll, 1968). The first outdoor productions were held on the church steps. This was likely uncomfortable

for the audience, but allowed the performers to use the church as a grand backdrop for the action (Cheney, 1918).

As with the Roman plays, over time the mystery plays moved away from strict religious themes and were eventually banished from church property (Cheney, 1918). Local trade guilds took over the production of the mystery plays and began to set up temporary theaters with bleachers for the audience in market places (Sporre & Burroughs 1990). Mystery plays were the first theatrical events to require a set change (or what theater professionals call a scene shift [Nelms, 1941]) in the middle of a performance. Greek and Roman theaters used the *skene* as a backdrop and sometimes incorporated paintings to suggest location, but there were no scene shifts during a Greek or Roman play (Hartnoll, 1968). Mystery plays, on the other hand, always had several settings, called *mansions*, which were handled in one of two ways. The first was to have a traditional static stage with several decorated booths or boxes fixed in a row (usually with 'heaven' and 'hell' at opposite ends of the stage) (Cheney, 1918). This system allowed the actors to move from one *mansion* to the next as the script demanded (Cheney, 1918). The most famous stage of this type was used for the Mystery Play in 1547 Valenciennes, France (Fig. 3.3). The set included lakes, ships, mansions, and a fire breathing dragon's mouth to symbolize hell (Sporre & Burroughs 1990).

The second approach to handling the need for scene shifts resulted in the creation of what is now known as pageant wagon plays (Fig. 3.4). Each of the local trade guilds would take a *mansion* and create a wheeled wagon that would represent that particular cycle in the story (Sporre & Burroughs 1990). In England, the trend was to have the audience sit on bleachers while each wagon was wheeled onstage at the appropriate time

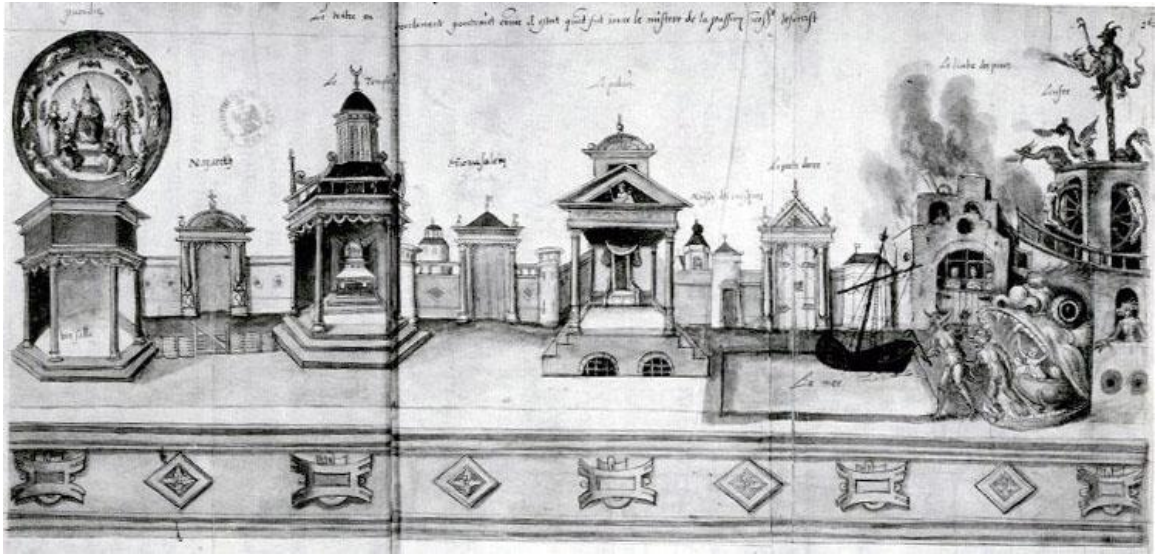


Fig. 3.3: Stage of the Valenciennes Mystery Play, 1547.
(Sporre & Burroughs, 1990, p. 12)



Fig. 3.4: Depiction of a Pageant Wagon Play.
The Triumph of Isabella, Brussels, 1615
(Hartnoll, 1968, p. 43)

and wheeled off when no longer needed (Cheney, 1918). In continental Europe it was more common for the carts to be distributed around town, with each section of the play performed at different times while the audience moved from station to station (Hartnoll, 1968).

Mystery and pageant wagon plays eventually became the preferred production style of traveling theater companies. The travelers would set up in the courtyards of inns. The encircling gallery of the inn would form 'box seats' for those with social status, while the area in front of the stage accommodated those without funds for covered seating. This practice ultimately influenced the design of Elizabethan open-air theaters (Cheney, 1918).

Renaissance and Garden Theater (1300 - 1550 CE)

The Renaissance was the beginning of the major move inside for theater. Ornate buildings for opera and ballet were built and today's proscenium stage came into being during this era (Hartnoll, 1968). Texts on Roman architecture, particularly Vitruvius's written work and illustrations from *D'Architectura* in 16-13 BCE on theater design, inspired the creation of the Teatro Olimpico (Hartnoll, 1968). As Sporre and Burroughs explain in their book *Scene Design in the Theater*, Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, Italy (1584) is an indoor theater originally designed by Andrea Palladio (with additions by Vincenzo Scamozzi after Palladio's death). While Teatro Olimpico is a fully enclosed building, it is notable for its ellipse shaped chorus section which provided better site lines than the Roman's semi-circle. This was also one of the first theaters to have permanent three-dimensional scenery with forced perspective. In support of the forced perspective, the stage was slanted slightly toward the audience. This practice continued until the

Victorian age and inspired the terms *upstage* and *downstage* which are still used by theater professionals today. (Sporre & Burroughs, 1990).

Other set designers of the time would combine prospective illusion paintings with three-dimensional elements. The architect and painter Sebastian Serlio, also inspired by Vitruvius's book, developed what was called *stall scenery* in 1545. Stall scenery covers almost every scene shift with just three classic sets: the tragic set, the comic set and the satyr play. This is a big contrast to the mediaeval mystery plays which could call for forty or more *mansions* (Sporre & Burroughs, 1990).

During the Renaissance, a new interest in garden design among the nobility developed. In *Buildings across Time*, Moffett asserts that this is the era where landscape design was raised to the level of 'major art'. Several Italian Renaissance gardens, like Pope Julius II's Villa Giulia in Rome, Italy, were used for theatrical performances (Moffett et al., 2004).

The private outdoor theater space located in a designed garden has been labeled 'the garden theater' by Sheldon Cheney. The archaeological discovery of a private theater in the Roman Imperial Villa at Pausilypon (near Naples, Italy) suggests that the garden theater may have begun in ancient Roman times. However, the more well-known and better documented garden theaters (Villa Gori near Siena, Tuscany, Villa Marlia in the province of Lucca, Tuscany [Fig. 3.5], Villa Collodi at Pescia in the province of Pistoia, Tuscany, etc.) were designed during the Italian Renaissance. Garden theaters were generally installed on private property and the performances held in them were for small audiences. This type of theater landscape was meant to look like a part of the larger garden and not like a theater (Fig 3.6). Those enjoying the garden would only be aware

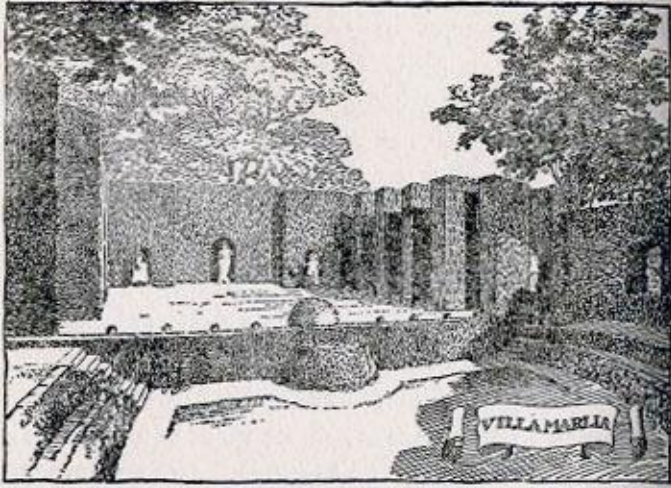


Fig. 3.5: The Garden Theater at Villa Marlia.
Drawing by Henry Vincent.
(Cheney, 1918, p. 94)

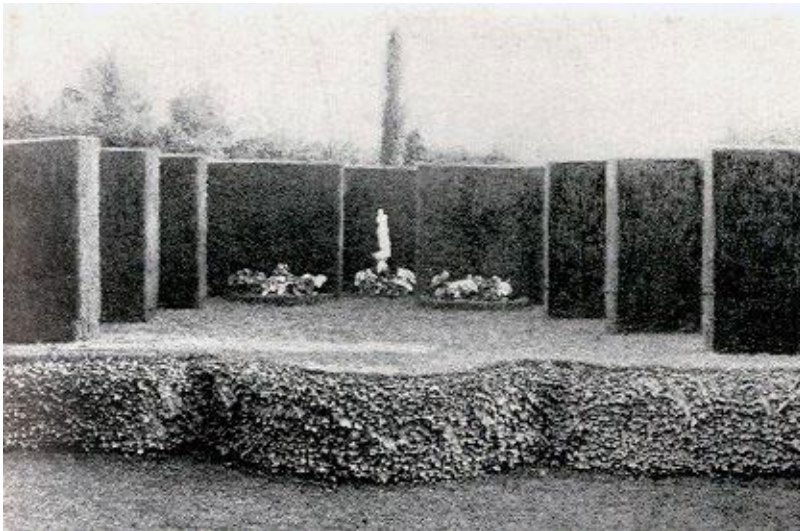


Fig. 3.6: Modern Example of the Italian Villa Garden Theater
From the Estate of Mr. Bothin in Montecito, CA.
(Cheney, 1918, p. 91)

of its function as a theater if there was a performance underway. In the Italian landscape, these theaters were incorporated fully with the house and garden design. They were often placed at important axis points, and a statue was generally placed at the center of the backstage wall. The garden theater provided the necessary theater elements (a stage, backstage, potential audience seating), but left out embellishments (pillars, stage frame, etc.). Most importantly (as it distinguishes garden theater from later nature theater), the natural backdrop to the action was clearly manmade and maintained with formal lines (Cheney, 1918).

Elizabethan Playhouses (1576 - 1642 CE)

While the Italian's taste in theater changed during the Renaissance, the English were still enjoying traveling mystery plays (Hartnoll, 1968). As mentioned previously, in England traveling players performed in the courtyards of inns. The success of these traveling productions contributed to the design of the Elizabethan open-air theater (Cheney, 1918). The first of these buildings was designed and built by James Burbage in 1576 in Shoreditch, England (modern day London), and was simply named 'The Theater'. Subsequent playhouses (the Rose in 1587, the Swan in 1598 [Fig. 3.7], the Globe in 1599, etc. all located in London, England) were designed in a similar style (Sporre & Burroughs, 1990). It is believed that the Elizabethan playhouse had seven spaces for the actors to use: the main stage, an inner stage at the same level hidden by a curtain, the gallery, an inner stage at the gallery level, two window stages, and a balcony with stairs leading up to it (Sporre & Burroughs, 1990). The main stage was a raised, partially covered platform with a wall (often having a classical façade) possessing doors on either side to separate front and backstage (Hartnoll, 1968). Like Grecian theater,

Elizabethan playhouse did not rely on changing scenery (Sporre & Burroughs, 1990). Audience members who could afford to, sat in the covered gallery on benches and stools, while those less well off stood in front of the main stage without a roof's protection (Hartnoll, 1968). The covered gallery was often several stories tall and formed a round exterior wall around the theater creating a 'pit' open to the sky (Cheney, 1918). A civil war between the Puritans and the Church of England, which started in 1642, caused the closure of all the English playhouses for 18 years (Hartnoll, 1968). None of the original Elizabethan playhouses survived into the present day (Cheney, 1918).



Fig. 3.7: Interior of 'The Swan' Playhouse
Contemporary pen Drawing
(Sporre & Burroughs, 1990, p. 18)

Nature Theaters (1900 - 1950 CE)

There is one more type of outdoor theater that developed after the Elizabethan playhouse that deserves mention: the nature theater. The nature theater became popular in early 1900s America. This type of theater was distinctive from the other forms of theaters in several ways. First, it had no architectural stage (Fig. 3.8). The actors often used natural (or natural looking) clearings as their performance space. The nature theater had vistas of natural beauty (mountains, rivers, valley, forest, etc.) for a backdrop rather than a formally maintained planting design. Any manmade adjustments needed for the sake of the performance were hidden from the audience. However, permanent seating was sometimes installed for the audience's comfort (Cheney, 1918).

One of the most notable designers of nature theaters was the landscape architect Jens Jensen. Jensen's players' greens were generally located in wood clearings with red cedar trees used a scenery and a natural stage. The stage space was separated from the



Fig. 3.8: Example of a Nature Theater Stage.
Portion of the Stage of the Mount Tamalpais Theater, Mill Valley, CA
(Cheney, 1918, p. 85)

audience seating area through the use of a line of trees, a water feature or a 'council rock' (intended to suggest a space where early humans would gather together in the evenings). Jensen's players' greens were meant to be used at dusk or at night with only fire and moonlight to illuminate the action. One of the most notable players' greens is located in Columbus Park in Chicago, IL (Grese, 1992).

Another form of nature theater that Jensen used was the council ring (Fig. 3.9 & 3.10) like the one found at Jensen's own studio in Ravinia, IL. This was a simple circular space with stone benches and a centrally located fire pit meant to resemble a Native American *kiva*. These council rings were generally placed at the edge of a forest or woodland with a vista of a meadow or lake. They were meant to be democratic gathering places for discussions, poetry readings, meditation and drama productions (Grese, 1992).

Frank Waugh was a friend of Jensen and from the nature theater trend came Waugh's 1917 book *Outdoor Theaters: The Design, Construction and Use of Open-Air Auditoriums*. In his book, Waugh suggested that outdoor theaters should mimic the Greek amphitheaters by choosing sites within concave sloping hillsides in order to take advantage of natural topography. For theaters meant to be used during the day, Waugh suggested a north-south orientation, as sunlight falling at a 75-90 degree angle on to the stage provides the best pictorial effect without interfering with the vision of the audience or the performer. He cautioned that when deciding on site orientation, the designer should take natural ventilation into account. As outdoor theaters are generally used in the summertime, allowing wind to flow through the site helps keep the audience at a comfortable temperature and discourages insects (Waugh, 1917).



Fig. 3.9: One of Jens Jensen's Council Rings.
Overlooking Green Bay in Ellison Bay, WI
(Grese, 1992, p. 177)



Fig. 3.10: Plan Views of the Jens Jensen Council Ring.
(Grese, 1992, p. 177)

Waugh suggested that the designer consider site entrances carefully, because these are the most appropriate places for site furnishings like statuary or columns. He recommended that a fence (carefully concealed from the audience's view) was necessary to keep those who had not paid for the performance from wandering into the space and being disruptive. His design criteria also called for some form of lobby area to give the audience attendees a space to socialize before and after the show (Waugh, 1917).

Waugh believed an outdoor theater should accommodate an audience no larger than 400 people. This criterion keeps the performance space small, making it easier for the performers to 'reach' the audience. He also believed seating should blend in with the natural aesthetic of the space and be comfortable. Waugh suggested that grass terracing or wooden seats (made of rough sawed lumber) would make the best seating (Waugh, 1917).

For the performance space itself, Waugh suggested using trees, shrubs and hedges to produce a sense of intimacy and artistic enclosure for the audience. However, the planting design should be simple, as it was meant to be a background, not the main attraction. A brick or stucco wall was another option suggested for the stage backdrop. Regardless of the type of backdrop the designer chooses for the stage it should present a superior 'pictorial effect' without overpowering the performers. Waugh cautioned that the performance area was not a place for viewing the landscape. Spectacular views of nature were best suited to the entry points and lobby area. The stage itself should be approximately 15'x30' on level ground. Waugh proposed that stages made of grass or smoothed earth (strewn with local material such as pine needles) were preferred, although lumber could be used if absolutely necessary. No curtain should be required for an

outdoor theater, although the space would need off-stage wings and dressing rooms for the performers (Waugh, 1917).

Waugh was against the use of electric lights in outdoor theaters as he considered their artificial look out of place in a natural setting. He suggested torches and gas lights instead. Acoustics is the only area Waugh admitted to having no firm rules for success other than keeping the space as small as possible. He contended that acoustics, particularly in the outdoors, are always a gamble (Waugh, 1917).

Current Trends

Chapter 5 will take a closer look at contemporary performance landscapes, but there are a few trends that deserve mention here. The 50s, 60s and 70s in the U.S. brought changes to the theater industry. There was a new desire to make budget friendly theater, which encouraged theater companies to use found spaces for their performances rather than costly professional venues. The Off Broadway and Off Off Broadway movements faced the challenges of using spaces not intended for theatrical use by moving away from the proscenium theater design preferred since the Renaissance. The thrust stage was rediscovered along with theater in the round. This experimentation with theater spatial form extended into a renewed interest in outdoor theater's potential (Bottoms, 2004).

One of the new trends was termed 'environmental theater', which is used when describing a production that has been adapted to fit the performance space rather than the other way around (Fig. 3.11). Another new trend was an attempt to recapture historical theater experiences. This is why many of the most notable theater landscapes today, like the Oregon Shakespearean Festival in Ashland, OR, and New York City's Shakespeare in the Park at Delecorte Theater in Central Park exist to support Shakespeare festivals.

There was also a push for universities with performing art departments to incorporate performance landscapes into their campuses which continues on into today. For example, Concordia University Wisconsin in Mequon, WI, included a small amphitheater with a view across Lake Michigan (Fig. 3.12) as part of a bluff restoration project that finished construction in 2008 (Arvidson, 2011). Another example is New World Symphony (an orchestral academy in Miami Beach, FL) which was featured in May 2011's Landscape Architecture Magazine for incorporating a park intended to host performance events in the design of its new location. The landscape architecture firm hired to design the park, West 8, employed acoustic experts and incorporated miles of cable and a projection system into this space. When not in use by the academy, the design also functions as a city park (Gendall, 2011).



Fig. 3.11: Example of Environmental Theater.
Circle Ensemble Theater Company's 2011 Production of *Metamorphoses*
Ashford Manor in Watkinsville, GA
Provided by the Circle Ensemble Theater Company



Fig. 3.12: New Amphitheater at Concordia University Wisconsin
Mequon, WI
(Arvidson, 2011, p. 62)

CHAPTER 4

User Requirements and Preferences

The Players

As with any field, the theater has a set of specific job titles. There are times, particularly with community theater, where an individual may take on more than one job (i.e. the technical director may also be the lighting designer), but it is still helpful to know the official names of the key players and what their particular concerns are likely to be in regard to space.

Stage Director: the top of the decision pyramid for a production. He/she is responsible for all of the creative decisions and is concerned with the ‘big picture’ of the production (Goldberg, 2005). Based on stakeholder interviews, stage directors have a tendency to prefer performance areas that are flexible. For example, Charles Massey of the Lost Colony Theater Company in Manteo, NC, mentioned in our interview that he preferred spaces where the audience could be moved around to form different types of performance spaces (interview, Feb. 29, 2012). Spaces that are adaptable in their configuration give the director more of a choice in how to interpret the script.

Scenic Designer: in charge of the physical environment of the production (Goldberg, 2005). He/she is interested in having storage areas for set pieces. This is particularly true when working in outdoor theaters because of the

potential for sun and precipitation damage to set elements. The set designer also needs space near the stage to hold set elements during a performance when they are not needed onstage. If a theater company has a permanent home, the set designer generally has a set shop specifically designated for the creation of sets.

Costume and Make-Up Designer: in charge of the performers' appearances (Goldberg, 2005). Make-Up designers in particular need a place to prepare performers with lighting similar to what is on stage and a place to store apparel and supplies. A theater company with a permanent home will often have a costume shop specifically for the creation and storage of costumes.

Lighting Designer: responsible for all lighting fixtures, patterns, color filters and dimmers needed to establish an appropriate lighting mood for a production (Jones, 1969). In general, the stage needs to be lit from above (Elder et al., 1979), and so access to areas for hanging lights (be it from a catwalk, ladder, or the ability to lower and raise a ceiling grid) is important to a lighting designer. Lighting design is largely about creating patterns of light on the stage that can be altered by adjusting light intensity (Ham, 1972). To create patterns, a lighting designer must be able to cast light from the same angle onto multiple areas of the stage. For example, if a lighting design separates the stage into six segments (three upstage, three downstage) at least six lights at the same angle will be needed to cover the stage. Because of this need, a lighting designer prefers to have grid pattern options for lighting which is usually accomplished in indoor theaters with a ceiling grid system of standard

1-1/2" pipe (Elder et al., 1979). According to Ashley Johnstone, a lighting designer in San Diego, CA, the more options available for hanging lights, the more complex the lighting design can be (personal correspondence, Feb. 15, 2012). A lighting design plan that illustrates the number of lights that can be required for one production is shown in Fig. 4.1.

Sound Designer: responsible for any sound effects a production requires and for insuring the performers can be heard within the space. Acoustics are important to a sound designer. Microphones can be used in places where natural acoustics are not sufficient, but they come with a set of concerns, such as insuring a microphone is off when a performer is not onstage.

Technical Director: the coordinator of all production design work (lighting, sound, and set) (Goldberg, 2005). He/she is responsible for building, placing and maintaining the stage design. Like the stage director, the technical director is a 'big picture' thinker and is concerned with the technical support a space can easily provide, particularly in regard to electricity. While the stage director prefers spaces to be adaptable and creative, interview findings suggest that technical staff may be resistant to informal theater spaces because of the extra work needed to make the space technologically functional.

Stage Manager: takes control of the show after opening night. He/she is responsible for insuring that the play remains true to the stage director's original design for however long the production runs. He/she is also in charge of the day to day details of managing the cast and crew. For example, it is the stage manager who insures everyone is on time to rehearsal (Goldberg, 2005).

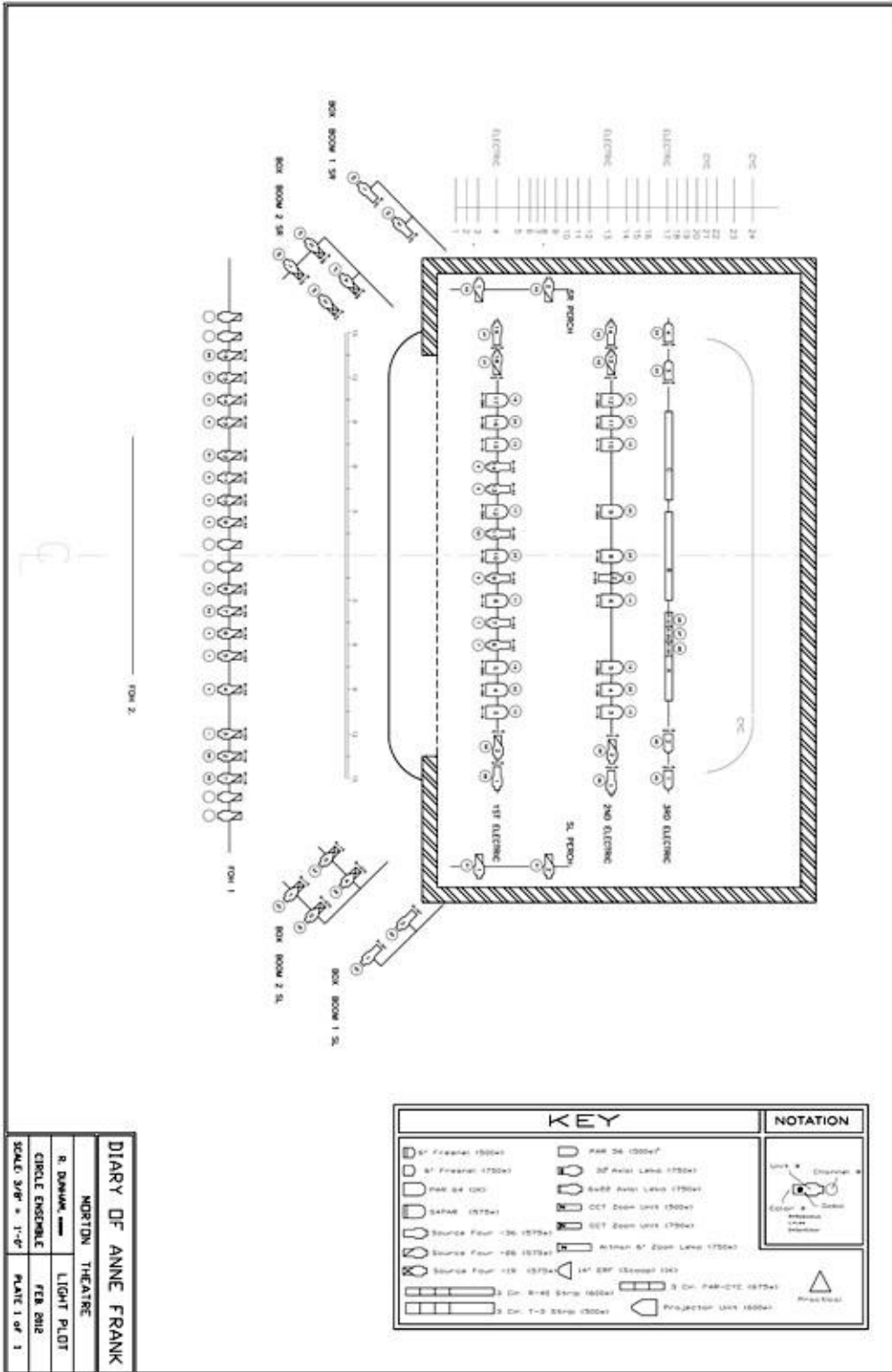


Fig. 4.1: Example of a Lighting Design Site Plan Created by Richard Dunham

Performer: the actor or singer that brings the stage director's vision to life. Based on stakeholder interviews, most performers are concerned with whether or not the audience can see and hear them. They also require backstage space to wait while their character is not on stage or for costume changes, etc. Several interviewees mentioned that outdoor performances can be more physically demanding than an indoor performance (because of the heat and the effort to project their voices). Therefore, performers in the outdoors would benefit from a place to rest when they are not on stage.

Stage Crew/ Stagehand: help with any additional tasks that are needed backstage. Stagehands have specialized duties, such as the props master/mistress who insures that all props are properly stored and maintained in between performances.

Audience: the 'client'. The comfort of audience members (particularly in regard to seating areas) is an important design element, as theatrical events can last for several hours. Audiences also need bathrooms and prefer to have access to covered areas in case of precipitation. Permanent theaters will often provide concession stands and gift shops to their patrons.

Theater Definitions

Complicating the issue of designing theater landscapes is the specialized language that is used exclusively in theater. This makes it difficult for the theater professional to communicate his/her needs to a designer with no theatrical background (Kent, 2010). The following are terms and definitions to help bridge the gap.

Proscenium Stage: Technically, in order to be a proscenium stage a bracketing arch must frame the onstage action, however professionals often refer to any theater where the audience is allowed to view the stage from only one side as being a proscenium stage (Fig.4.2) . This is one of the most common forms of indoor theater arrangement today. If the designer is working with a narrow space, this type of stage is ideal (Elder et al., 1979). However, S. Westfall from Lafayette College in Easton, PA, asserts that the proscenium stage is also the theater type most likely to divide the performer from the audience (interview, March 2, 2012).

Apron: the portion of the stage extending beyond the proscenium arch (Fig. 4.2).

Thrust Stage: the audience surrounds the stage on three sides (Fig. 4.3). This design encourages intimacy with the audience, but it also requires a space with width and it does not support elaborate scenery (Elder et al., 1979).

Theater in the Round: the performance area is placed in the center of the audience, but the actual performance space is not necessarily round (Fig. 4.4). This is another design that allows for intimacy, but little scenery (Elder et al., 1979). In his interview, R. Dunham from the University of Georgia in Athens, GA, did caution that the more sides the audience can see the action from, the more complex the technical issues, such as lighting, become (interview, Feb. 15, 2012).

Black Box Theater: A simple performance space, usually a square room painted black with a flat floor. Because of its simplicity, a black box theater is seen to be a very adaptable and creative performance space.

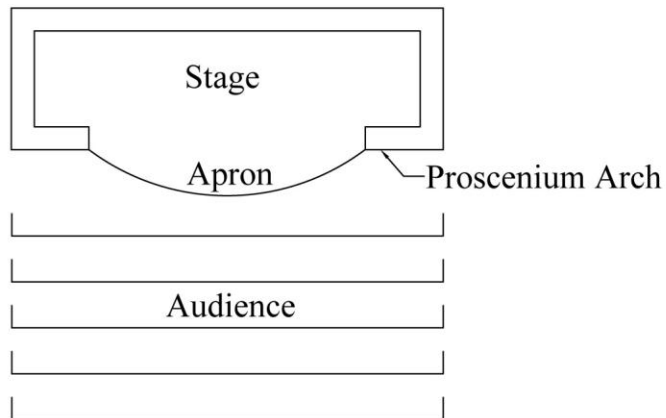


Fig. 4.2: Proscenium Stage with an Apron - Site Plan

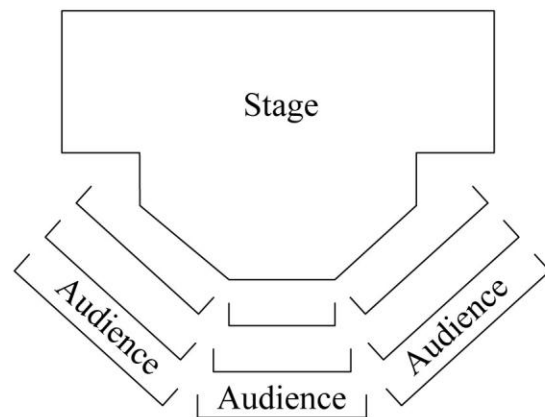


Fig. 4.3: Thrust Stage - Site Plan

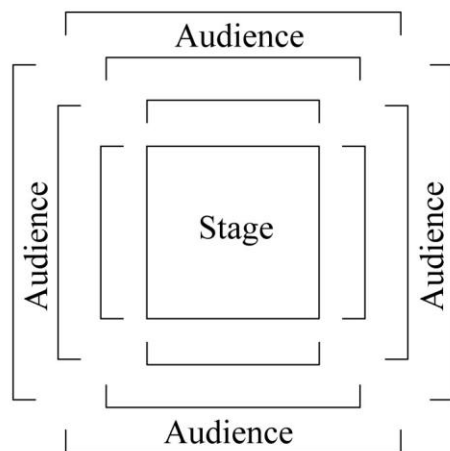


Fig. 4.4: Theater in the Round - Site Plan

Environmental Theater: Has at least two distinct definitions within the theater community: 1. A performance that has been adapted to fit a particular space rather than the other way around; 2. A theater design that combines audience space and performance spaces.

Green Room: A room backstage where the actors and crew may wait when they are not needed onstage.

Front of House: Areas of a theater accessible to the audience.

Backstage: Areas of a theater accessible only to the cast and crew of a production.

Stage Left: To the left of a person facing the audience (Fig. 4.5).

Stage Right: To the right of a person facing the audience (Fig. 4.5).

Downstage: toward the audience (Fig. 4.5).

Upstage: Away from the audience (Fig. 4.5).

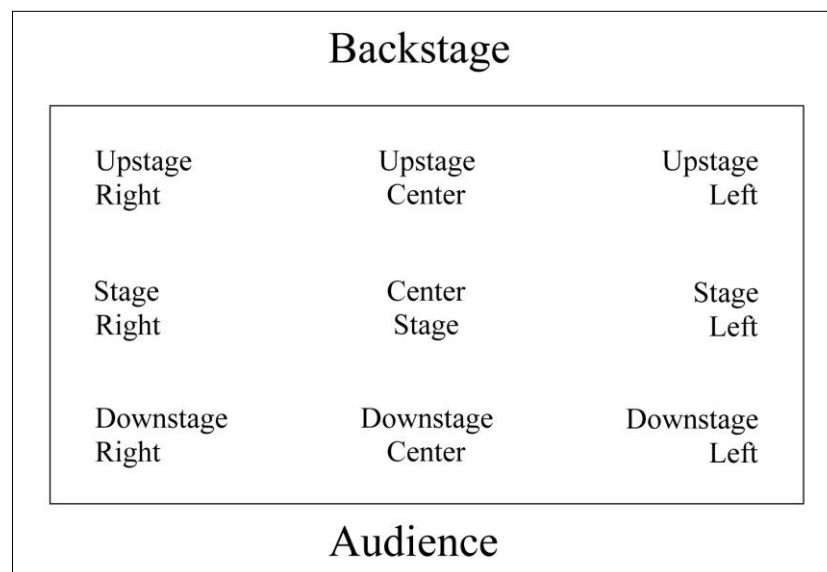


Fig. 4.5: Stage Directions - Site Plan

Wings: the areas to the side of the stage hidden from the audience where props are held and actors can wait when not needed on stage.

Legs: Fabric to either side of the stage that conceals the wings from the audience.

Fly Loft: the area above the stage (normally hidden from the audience's view) that holds hanging scenery.

Rigging: rope, cable, wire and chains that can be used to raise and lower sets from the fly loft.

Flat: a basic scenery unit that can be combined with other flats to form set walls. Generally this is a rectangular framework made of light wood and wrapped in cover stock.

Cover Stock: fabric covering a flat that can be painted.

Drops: Large scenic paintings which can be as big as the stage itself.

Batten: wood or metal piping on which scenery material is hung.

Gridiron: the support system for rigging and batten.

Light Mast: a gridded tower structure that lights can be hung on.

Turntable: a revolving stage.

Wagons: Platforms on wheels.

Casters: wheels used on scenery that must be rolled on and off stage.

Performance: A single event on one night.

Production: The entire run of a play.

The Product

What a theatrical event provides is an *experience* different from everyday life. As C. Massey from the Lost Colony in Manteo, NC, explained, the play itself is not enough, it is everything that goes into an evening at ‘the theater’ that attracts an audience (Interview, Feb. 29, 2012). This experience includes the dinner eaten beforehand, the encounter with a friend in the lobby area, the atmosphere of the performance space, as well as the quality of the performance itself. This means that the entry sequence and the performance space itself should support a cohesive and distinctive audience experience.

The Profession

The theater industry struggles with whether it is defined as an art form or as pure entertainment. Those who view theater as an art form, believe that the theater’s true value lies in its ability to elevate and disturb the viewer. The emotional and intellectual effect a performance can have on the audience is of greater importance to the ‘art form’ professional than creating an illusion (personal communication, J. Re’Arp-Dunham, April 4, 2012). A client who takes the ‘art form’ view is likely to prefer informal spaces whose aesthetic already suggests a certain kind of production. Those who view their profession as ‘pure entertainment’ are likely to require a more formalized theater environment that can be adapted to produce a variety of atmospheres. Determining which view the client takes of the theater is important when determining the correct type of theater space to design. Figure 4.6 is a matrix of several of the space types discussed in Chapter 3 organized in relation to their formality and their applicability to ‘pure entertainment’ versus ‘art form’. For example, the roman amphitheater was a formal theater space focused on entertainment and so holds the top left hand corner’s place. In contrast,

environmental theater uses found spaces (spaces not originally designed for theater) and is more interested in bringing the audience members' attention to the earth's natural cycle and the environment than with providing passive entertainment and so takes the bottom right corner position.

Primary Design Requirements

In its most basic form, all that needs to be present for a theatrical event to happen is a performer and an audience. According to several of the interviewed professionals, as long as these two elements are present, any space can become a theater. This means a theater landscape's primary design needs may be broken into two categories: audience requirements and performer requirements. Based on interview responses, the most important audience requirement is comfort, particularly in regard to seating and location so that the audience members will stay throughout the performance. The performer on the other hand, has two requirements: to be seen and to be heard by the audience. This means the design must visually highlight the performance space in some way, and that the audience must either be kept close to the performer or the site design must provide acoustics that will allow the actor's voice to carry.

Secondary Design Requirements

The secondary design requirements of a theater professional are a bit more complex, but can be divided into three categories: audience, performer, and technical desires. The audience prefers to have amenities such as bathrooms, concession stands and even gift shops. Attendees prefer having a covered shelter for precipitation events. Audiences also like the theater landscape to have reasonable air circulation to help keep

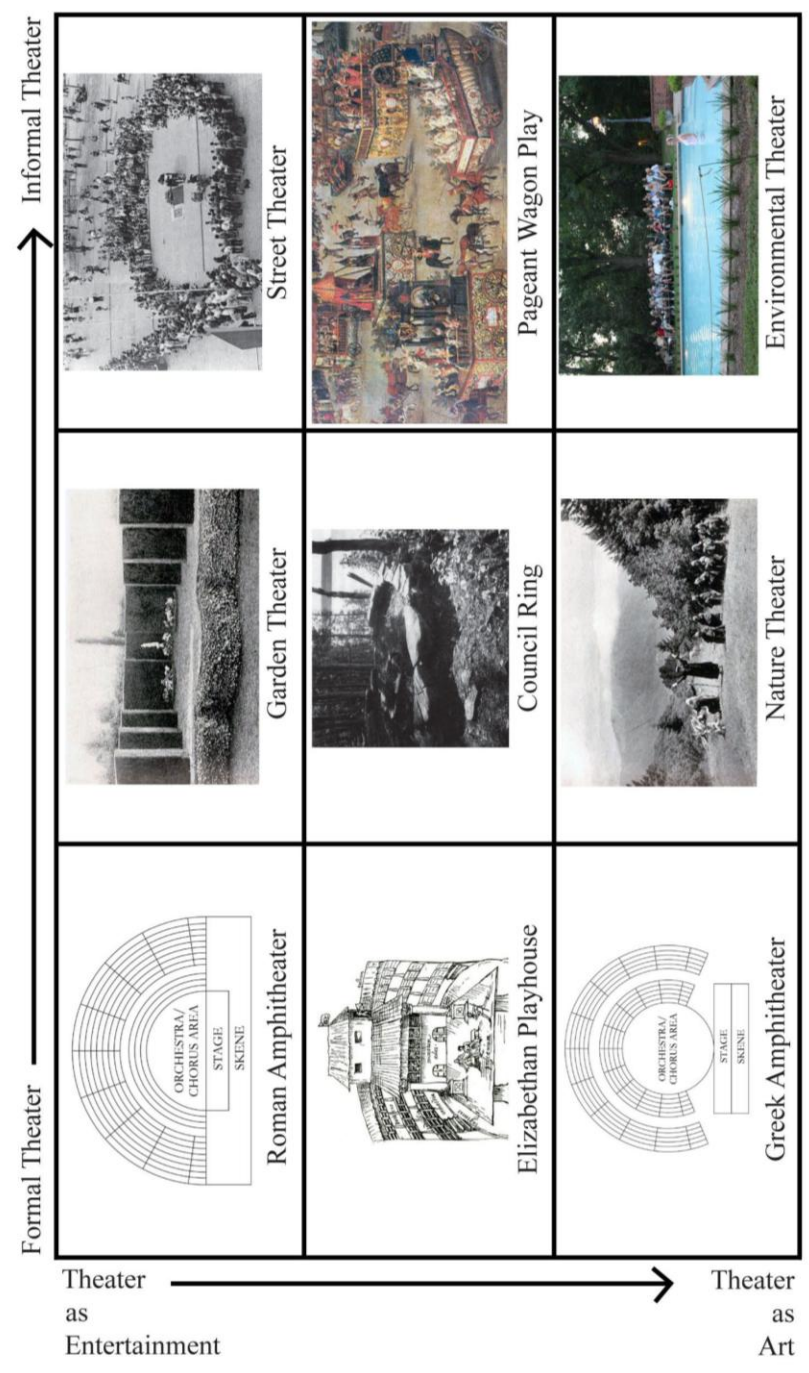


Fig. 4.6: Matrix of Theater Space Formality Verses Professional Viewpoint of Theater
Picture Sources from left to right: top row - (Cheney, 1918), (Cheney, 1918, p. 91), (Mason, 1992, p. 97), middle row - (Sporre & Burroughs, 1990, p. 18), (Grese, 1992, p. 177), (Hartnoll, 1968, p. 43), bottom row - (Cheney, 1918), (Cheney, 1918, p. 85), (Circle Ensemble Theater Company, 2012)

the temperature down and limit the insect population within the space. However, the stage should be sheltered from the wind so that it does not disrupt onstage props or scenery.

Professionals prefer theater spaces that provide options. In my interview with Michael O'Connell, the technical director for the University of Georgia's Department of Theatre and Film Studies in Athens, GA, he recommended that the designer not be confined by typical stage formats, but should think about how to make movement across the stage interesting to watch (interview, Feb. 22, 2012). Performers would prefer to have wing space and backstage amenities like indoor dressing rooms. In fact, according to C. Massey from the Lost Colony, the backstage area should be the same square footage as the front of house areas (interview, Feb. 29, 2012).

Technical crew members prefer formal theater environments because of the built in support. Found and informal spaces can require a significant amount of time and effort on the part of the technical crew in order install appropriate infrastructure for things like lights, sound systems and set elements. Interviews revealed a preference to have easy vehicular access to the stage as loading and unloading equipment is physically taxing. Access to electricity and a variety of easily accessible places to hang lights is also essential. Technical crew members need a space (preferably covered) where they can control lights and sound during the performance. Ideally, this space should have a view of the action on the stage and the crew members should be able to hear audio cues from the performers.

CHAPTER 5

Contemporary Theater Landscapes in the U.S.

The previous chapters established a background in regard to the different types of theater landscapes, the theater professional and the unique needs of theater spaces. This chapter examines four existing theater landscapes in the United States: Waterside Theater in Manteo, NC, Oak Grove Theater in Staunton, VA, Anita’s Way in New York City, NY, and Lafayette College’s Arts Plaza in Easton, PA. As with the theater landscapes discussed in Chapter 3, these case studies can be organized by their formality and their use for those that view theater as ‘art form’ or ‘pure entertainment’ (Fig. 5.1).

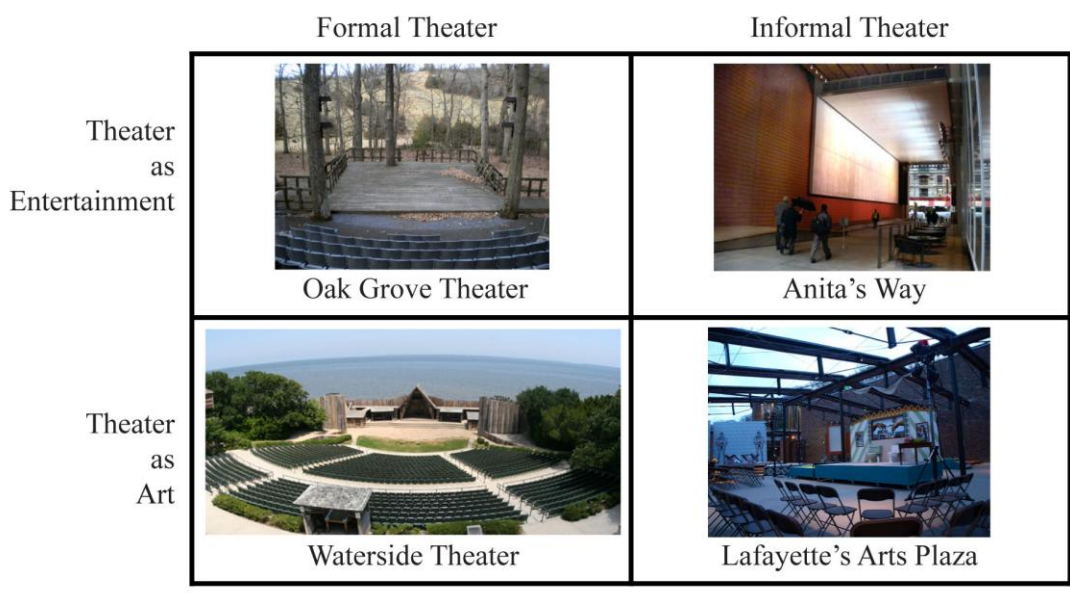


Fig. 5.1: Matrix of Case Studies Examining Formality versus Professional Viewpoint of Theater.

Historic Theater Landscapes

WATERSIDE THEATRE - MANTEO, NC - *Formal, Art Form*

Background. The Waterside Theatre (Fig. 5.2) has been used as a theater landscape since 1937 and is home to the longest running outdoor symphonic drama in the world: *The Lost Colony*. The Lost Colony is a play written by Paul Green to present the history of the men, women and children who settled on Roanoke Island in 1587 and then disappeared. The theater is located on the very site that they settled over 400 years ago. *The Lost Colony* is the only play performed in the Waterside Theatre. Its season begins in early June and runs through early August. The site is maintained and used by the non-profit Lost Colony Theater Company (the Lost Colony website, 2011).

The designer of the theater was ‘Skipper’ Bell, a former resident of Yorkshire, England, with a background in landscaping, thatching roofs and constructing log cabins. While the theater still closely resembles Mr. Bell’s original design (Fig. 5.3), it has gone through several renovations (Fig. 5.4) due to major storm events, fire disasters and the occasional need for updated facilities (the Lost Colony website, 2011). For example, Lance Culpepper, the Production Coordinator for the Lost Colony Theatre Company mentioned that two new lighting towers (Fig. 5.5 and 5.6) were installed before 2010 to replace outdated structures and equipment as well as provide a safer work environment. The National Park Service in cooperation with the theater company is currently in the process of insuring that every building has a fire sprinkler system (Fig. 5.7). L. Culpepper explained that as the theater is located on a historic site owned by the Federal Government and managed by the National Park Service, changes to the theater (particularly in regard to new structures) have to go through a lengthy approval process.



Figure 5.2: Current Waterside Theatre
 Provided by The Lost Colony Theater Company

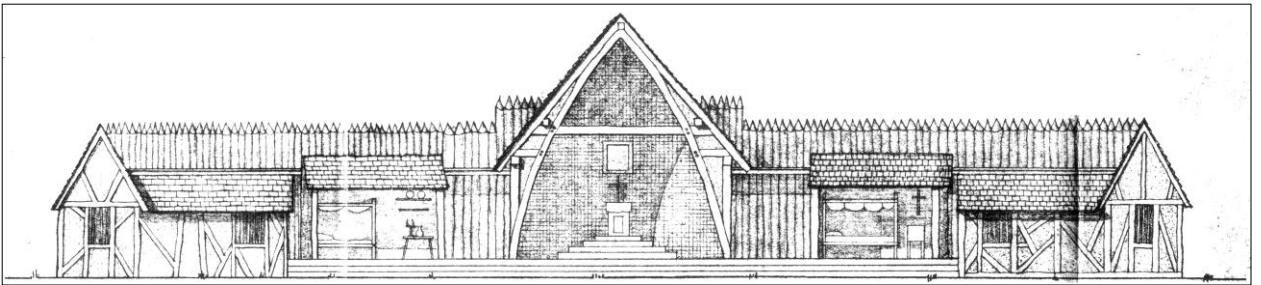


Figure 5.3: Mr. Bell's intent for the Waterside Theatre - Elevation Sketch
 Provided by The Lost Colony Theater Company



Figure 5.4: The Waterside Theatre 1937
 Provided by The Lost Colony Theater Company



Figures 5.5: New Lighting Tower



Figures 5.6: New Lighting Tower



Figure 5.7: New Fire Sprinkler System

After the park service has approved a new project, the theater company goes through its own committee approval process to determine what the new structure will look like in order to insure a continuous aesthetic (personal communication, Feb. 29, 2012).

Charles Massey, the Lost Colony's Director of Marketing, explained that when the production opened, it was the first event on Manteo Island not related to fishing or hunting and is considered the island's first tourist attraction. Since then however, the island has acquired several other attractions such as Harrah's Cherokee Casino and Hotel and the theater is experiencing a drop in ticket sales. Unlike theaters that have a season of shows every year with repeat customers, the Lost Colony's main attendee is the tourist likely to be a one-time client. Island residents may attend special events such as the celebration of Virginia Dare's Birthday (the first English baby born in America), but they are not the theater's main audience (interview, Feb. 29, 2012).

Location. The theater is located on land in Fort Raleigh National Historic Park (Fig. 5.8). The site is oriented in the north-south direction with the audience at the southern end and the stage to the north (Fig. 5.9). The theater is far enough away from the main road systems that automobile noise is not a concern during a performance, but there are occasional issues with airplane and boat noise. L. Culpepper also explained that the theater suffers from the occasional wildlife troubles. Squirrels in particular are a problem as they sometimes chew through exposed wires (Fig. 5.10) (interview, Feb. 29, 2012).

Audience Experience. During my site visit, L. Culpepper revealed what an audience member experiences when attending a performance of *The Lost Colony*. On a performance night, the attendees leave their cars, purchase their tickets at the box office (Fig. 5.11) and then follow a paved path through the woods to the theater (Fig 5.12)

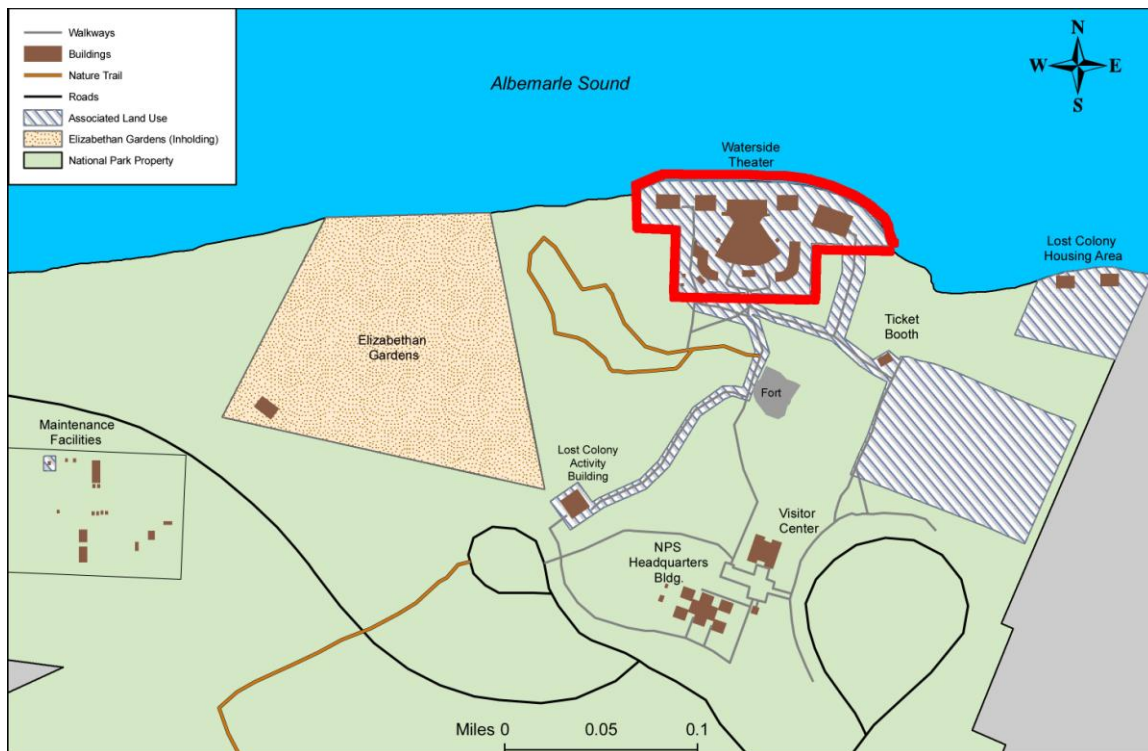


Figure 5.8: The Waterside Theatre’s Location within Ft. Raleigh National Park Provided by the Lost Colony Theater Company

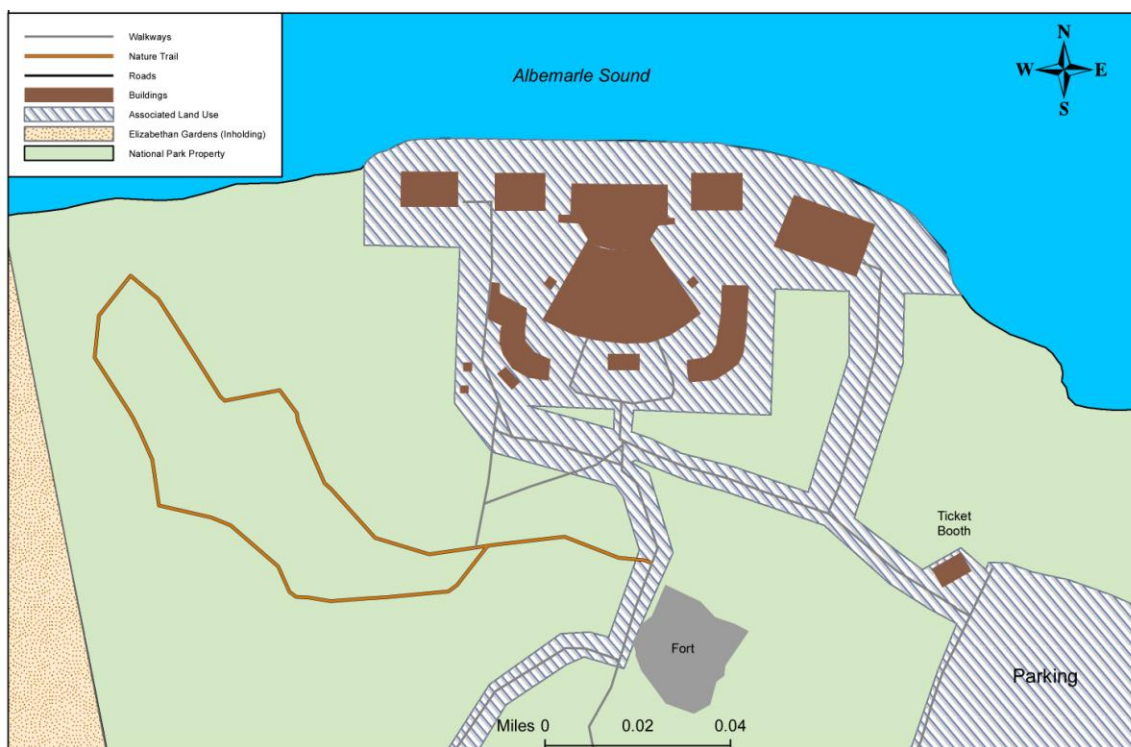


Figure 5.9: Close-Up of Waterside Theatre’s Orientation Provided by The Lost Colony Theater Company



Figure 5.10: Squirrel Damage



Figure 5.11: Box Office Booth



Figure 5.12: Path Leading to the Waterside Theatre



Figure 5.13: Waterside Theatre's Entrance
Featuring Lance Culpepper

The tone for the evening begins along this walk (before entering the theater itself) through an interactive pre-show. This pre-show consists of ‘path activities’ that vary in audience/performer contact, starting with actors dressed as Native Americans that can be seen wandering through the woods and gradually becoming more interactive until the audience members find themselves in a full blown Elizabethan market street atmosphere (the play begins in Elizabethan England). The entry sequence of spaces draws the audience into the play, helps block out the outside world and immediately creates a unique experience. Tickets are taken at the theater’s entrance (an opening in the wood wall that surrounds the performance space) (Fig 5.13) and then the audience walks around a tall building which terminates in a vista of the set and the ocean behind the theater (Fig. 5.14). Once seated, the audience can no longer view the water, making the stage the clear focus (Fig. 5.15). At the play’s conclusion, the attendees are ushered back down the (now lighted) paved path back to their cars. The show does not start until 8:30 p.m. in the evening so that scene changes are not done in full view of the audience. However, the 8:30 p.m. start does mean that this particular event can last until 11:00 p.m. (personal communication, Feb. 29, 2012).

According to L. Culpepper, the current theater can seat approximately 1,500 patrons. Seating started as simple backless benches which could accommodate up to 3,500 patrons. In 1996 the theater changed from benches placed on earth to individual plastic seats on a concrete base. Aisles between seating rows are sand troughs that are meant to handle stormwater drainage (Fig 5.16), but the troughs are a tripping hazard that need to be weeded and raked twice a day during performance season. Waterside theater provides all the audience amenities that an indoor theater has: restrooms, gift shop, first



Figure 5.14: Waterside Theatre's Vista



Figure 5.15: Performance of *The Lost Colony*
Provided by the Lost Colony Theatre Company



Figure 5.16: Sand Troughs Used for Stormwater Management



Figure 5.17: Covered Breezeway

aid area, isolated smoking area, concession stand and two covered breezeways that can hold the entire 1,500 members of the audience in case of rain (Fig. 5.17) (personal communication, Feb. 29, 2012).

Performer Considerations. L. Culpepper explained that the theater company attempts to keep the performance area's surroundings as 'natural' looking as possible and uses native evergreen material to provide enclosure. However, the production calls for actors to run through certain areas with bare feet (Fig. 5.18) and so maintenance activities have to accommodate both actor safety and the audiences' view. The current stage is concrete that is covered with beach sand for performances. Originally there was a choir loft to one side of the stage for the vocalists. The theater forms the classic bowl shape which (along with the surrounding evergreen material) enhances its acoustics. However, the theater is equipped with a surround sound audio system and the actors use microphones. The theater company uses lights that can handle rain exposure, but they must be refocused once a week because of wind interference. The technical crew has a covered production booth behind the audience for lighting and sound boards. All set pieces begin onstage and as the play progresses, the scenery is slowly peeled away until only the permanent set is left. Backstage wing space can accommodate all ninety performers and the removed set pieces (Fig. 5.19). Backstage also holds indoor men's and women's dressing rooms/bathrooms, a costume shop, maintenance facilities and an indoor rehearsal hall (Fig. 5.20 and 5.21) (personal communication, Feb. 29, 2012).



Figure 5.18: Area Actors Run On with Bare Feet



Figure 5.19: Wing Space



Figure 5.20: Indoor Dressing Rooms



Figure 5.21: View of Backstage

OAK GROVE THEATER - STAUNTON, VA - *Formal, Entertainment*

Background. Oak Grove Theater is a 59 year-old outdoor theater landscape that is 100% volunteer operated (Fig. 5.22 and 5.23). According to the company's board of directors, it was designed by Fletcher Collins Jr., a drama professor at Mary Baldwin College Theatre in Staunton, VA, as a place for his college students to perform during the summer months. He and his wife Margaret founded the Oak Grove Theater Company which still owns and runs the theater today. The theater company recently purchased the cow pasture behind the theater to make sure the stage's natural backdrop will not change. They produce a five show season every summer (two comedies, two dramas, and a musical), and each show runs every night for one week. They have a loyal audience base and typically sell 900 season tickets every year. This has been enough to keep the theater running at a slight profit, which is applied to the upkeep and improvement of the theater space. The theater company is governed by a diverse group of board members (electricians, architects, university theater professors) who donate their time, skills and ingenuity in order to produce performances with a range of technical requirements including multi-level sets and even a turntable (interviews with Oak Grove's board of directors. March 4, 2012).

Location. The theater is located on the outskirts of Staunton, VA in an agricultural/residential area. The performance space is situated in a clearing between trees that looks out over a cow pasture. The theater is located on a sharp downward slope with the stage at the lower end. The audience faces north/north-east. The site has a buffer of oak and evergreen trees between it and the busy road behind it, but vehicular noise can still disrupt a performance. While touring the site, Michael Lafferty, a member of the



Figure 5.22: Oak Grove Theater

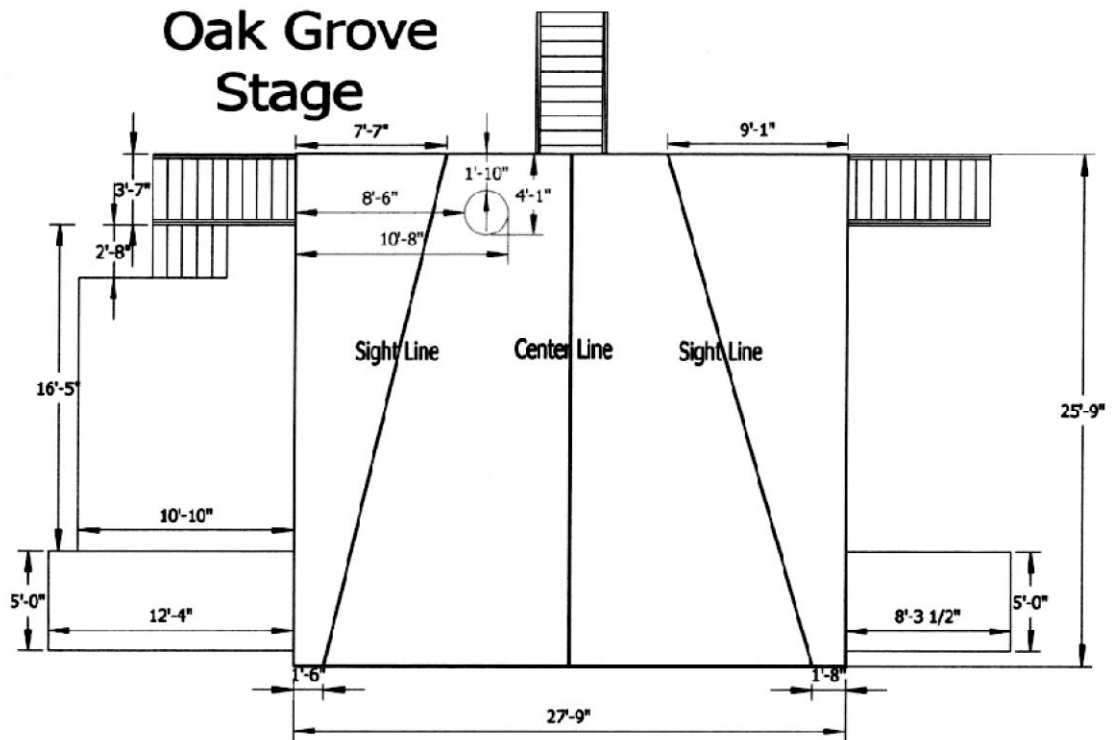


Figure 5.23: Oak Grove Theater Site Plan
 Provided by the Oak Grove Theater Company

board of directors, mentioned that other noise disturbances come from the surrounding residential neighborhoods. By ordinance, noise in the area is not restricted until 2 a.m. This works to the theater company's advantage when it has a boisterous audience, but can also work against it if a nearby house is hosting a party. As with the Waterside Theater, Oak Grove has had problems with wildlife. Cicadas late in the summer have occasionally drowned out the performers on stage and so now plays performed late in the season always have sets that will bounce sound back toward the audience (Fig 5.24 and 5.25). Performers have also had issues with cows mooing in the middle of a performance, bats flying at them while onstage and a chronic mouse infestation (personal communication, March 4, 2012).

Audience Experience. Audience members generally arrive for an Oak Grove performance between 6 and 6:30 p.m. They park either in the clearing in front of the theater or in the adjacent empty field. The patrons then engage in what Oak Grove's board of directors terms 'classy tailgating'. A few picnic tables are provided for this activity and many patrons bring tablecloths, wine, food and even candelabras to enjoy while socializing before the show. This traditional pre-show practice is part of what makes the Oak Grove experience unique. At 6:30 p.m. the theater space is opened by two ticket takers so that audience members may claim their seats with ropes or cushions before returning to socialize in the parking lot. Around 8:30 p.m., the theater company sounds a bell to indicate to the audience that the show is about to start. Officially the show begins at 8:45 p.m. and may end near midnight. The late start time not only insures that scenery can be moved on and offstage without audience members' detection, but also focuses attention on the well lit stage in the middle of a dark naturalistic setting. When



Figure 5.24: Set used to mitigate cicada noise
Provided by the Oak Grove Theater Company



Figure 5.25: Set used to mitigate cicada noise
Provided by the Oak Grove Theater Company

asked if they had ever considered doing shows during the day, Oak Grove's board of directors indicated that performing at night in the outdoors is part of what makes their space *magic*, and so have no plans to change their start time (Interviews with Oak Grove's Board of Directors. March 4, 2012).

The performance space can accommodate up to 198 audience members. As with the Waterside Theater, seating began as wooden benches, but the current configuration has individual plastic seats. The space provides a bathroom and concession stand for the audience. Summer precipitation events tend to be mild in nature and the audiences come prepared with ponchos and umbrellas. For larger precipitation events, the theater has a covered pavilion area which can serve as a temporary stage when necessary (Fig. 5.26) (personal communication, March 4, 2012).

Performer Considerations. The area surrounding the performance space is rustic in nature and is not altered unless necessary. Mr. Lafferty revealed that the stage started as a concrete slab, remnants of which can still be found on the site today. However, the current stage is a wooden platform with ramps and stairs to provide performers with entrance and exit areas. The stage includes an orchestra pit at stage right for the yearly musical production (Fig. 5.27). In general, no microphones are used in an Oak Grove production but a separate sound system is sometimes brought in for musical instruments. Lights are hung on trees or set on platforms behind the audience (Fig. 5.28, 5.29 and 5.30). A production booth for the lighting controls is located in a covered, raised structure behind the audience (Fig. 5.31). A backstage area is created by the land's natural slope (Fig. 5.32). Performers wait in a low area with a bench behind the stage when not performing. Low level LED blue lights are used to guide backstage action.



Figure 5.26: Covered Pavilion



Figure 5.27: Orchestra Pit



Figure 5.28: Potential Lighting Location.



Figure 5.29: Potential Lighting Location

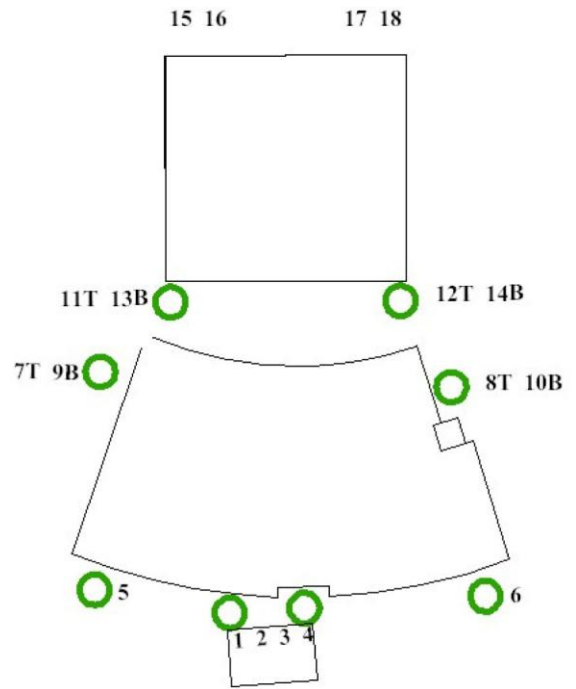


Figure 5.30: Lighting Plot Plan.
Provided by the Oak Grove Theater Company



Figure 5.31: Technical Booth



Figure 5.32: Backstage

Other onsite amenities include: indoor dressing rooms with lighted mirrors, storage space, bathrooms and the previously mentioned covered pavilion that also functions as a cast party venue (personal communication, March 4, 2012).

Public Spaces

ANITA'S WAY - NEW YORK CITY, NY - *Informal, Entertainment*

Background. Cook+Fox Architects was hired by the Durst Organization to design a plaza space that would be lively and well-used between two New York buildings. According to Allison Bobman, a communications associate with Cook+Fox Architects, in New York City, NY, because the backstage door for the Stephen Sondheim Theater leads right out into the pass-through, the designers decided an informal performance space was an appropriate programming goal. Due to the adjacency of the theater, there was a natural move to link the two projects in terms of programming. The space has been used by Chasama (a non-profit group that helps artists find unique outdoor performance venues around New York City to perform in) for fundraising, dancing and performance art events (email correspondence, Feb. 14, 2012).

Technically Anita's Way (Fig. 5.33, 5.34, 5.35) is the private property of the Bank of America, but the bank allows the general public to use its space. A security guard is posted 24 hours a day to insure the safety of both the site and the site's users. Photography is not allowed within the two-story space, but is allowed from outside looking in. Users are allowed to sit on the stage area, but are not allowed to stand on it and no smoking is permitted. I was there in late February when the weather was cold and a wind was blowing through the passageway, so there were few users present. However,



Figure 5.33: Outside View of Anita's Way

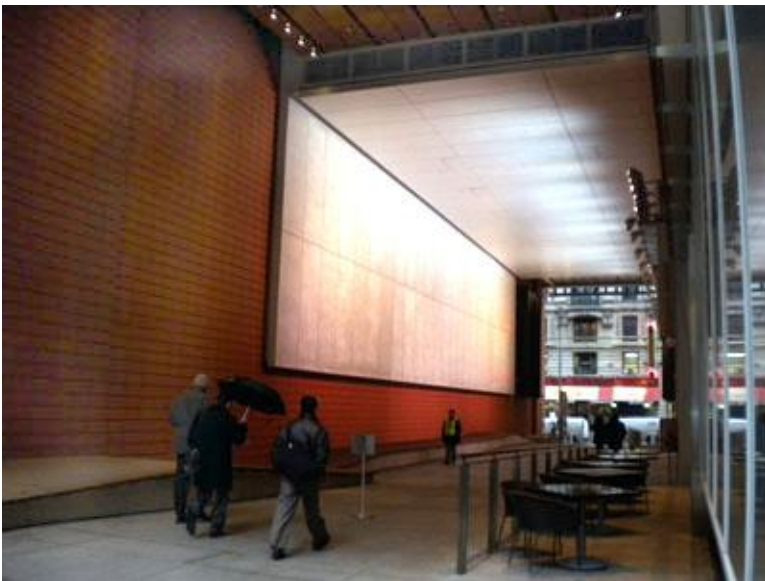


Figure 5.34: Inside View of Anita's Way

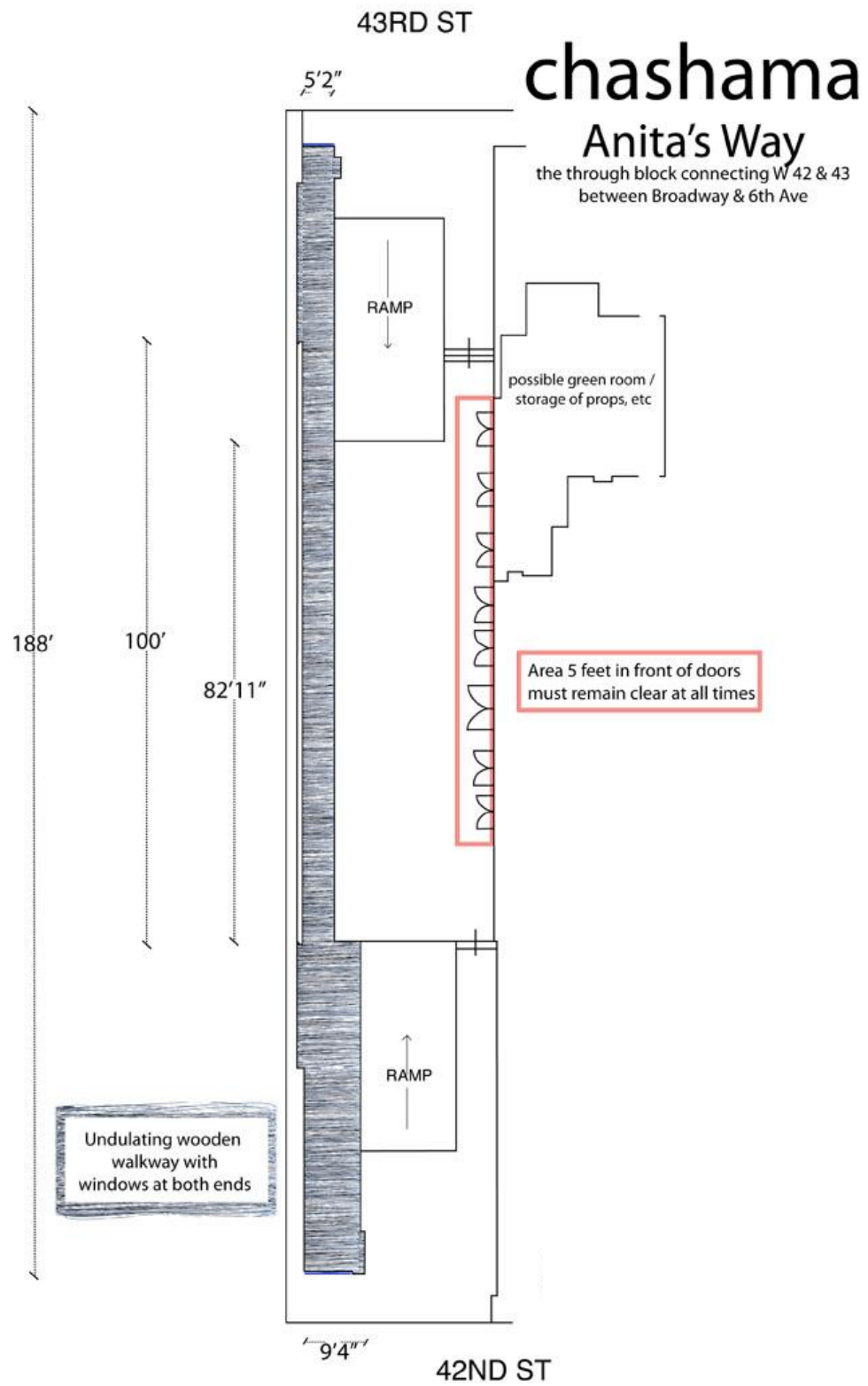


Figure 5.35: Site Plan of Anita's Way
Provided by Chashama

the on-duty security guard asserted that during the summer, there are many individuals who eat their lunch while sitting on the stage (personal communication, March 1, 2012).

Location. The site connects 42nd and 43rd Streets between 6th Street and Broadway. The space is on sloping ground (43rd Street is the low ground) with a roof. The site is bordered by the Bank of America Tower, the Stephen Sondheim Theater, a vacant property and a restaurant called Aureoles that has a small amount of outdoor seating within Anita's Way. As the site is right off of Times Square, street noise is a problem; however the space (particularly in its center) is quieter than the adjacent street.

Audience Experience. An audience member for an Anita's Way performance is typically a spontaneous attendee. According to New York's Midtown Gazette, this is what happened when Adam Frank's temporary art installation entitled *Performer*, was on display at the site. The installation consisted of a single spot light shown in the middle of the plaza. When a passer-by stepped into the spotlight, onsite speakers produced the sound of 500 cheering people (Contratto, 2011). According to one of the regular security guards, the sound would attract the attention of those walking on the street, who would stop and ask him what was going on and often would choose to stand in the spot light themselves (personal communication. March, 1 2012).

When the stage is in use, Anita's Way offers no seating. With the exception of the restaurant, the space does not offer any of the customary audience amenities. This suggests that audience members are likely to stop for a period of time to discover what is happening and take part in the event briefly before continuing on their way.

Performer Considerations. The area surrounding the stage is long and rectangular with a ceiling two stories tall. According to Pam Campbell, the project lead

for Anita's Way, the materials within the site are a reddish pink terracotta rainscreen tile wall covering and a white plaster wall that emerges from the red tile at the center of the space. The ceiling changes levels and materials (white plaster in the middle and bamboo paneling (Fig. 5.36) at either end) as one moves through the space. The floor is concrete with varied pattern; square tiles at either end followed by thin horizontal strips and a terrazzo with recycled glass for texture in the middle (phone conversation, March, 19, 2012).

During our phone conversation, P. Campbell revealed that the stage had been a particular design challenge. Building code in New York City forbids building only one step, so the stage had to be taller than what building code considered a 'step'. Fire code in New York City requires that platforms over a certain height have railings installed for public safety, and she did not want to install a railing which would make it difficult for the public to use the stage as a bench. Because of these two constraints and the onsite slope, a flat stage was not possible. Instead P. Campbell and her team designed the stage to have a vertical roll that fluctuates between the two measurement constraints (phone conversation, March, 19, 2012). It is made of thin strips of wood with uplighting underneath. The stage is located on the west side of the site. When not in use, the stage is intended to be a park bench (Fig 5.37). Before being informed by the security guard that it was not allowed, I did walk on the stage and found it to be a bit disconcerting. A dancer who is intent on body movement might enjoy the unique vertical roll, but for an actor it could be a hazard.

As previously mentioned, street noise is an issue for the site, but the white plaster walls help to dampen the audio distractions. Acoustically, the plaster wall and changing



Figure 5.36: Ceiling made of bamboo paneling

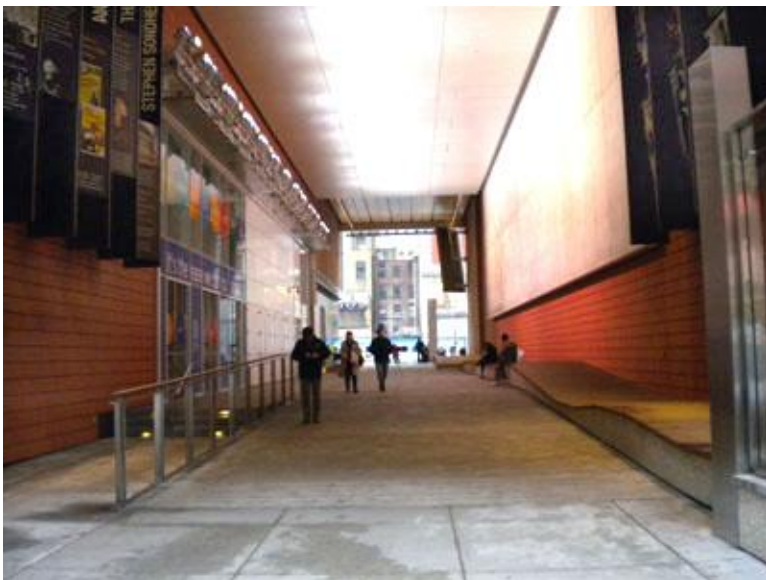


Figure 5.37: The stage is also a bench.

level of the ceiling also reduces flutter (sound that bounces back and forth between parallel walls) (Burriss-Meyer & Goodfriend, 1957). The site is capable of supporting a sound system, however, email correspondence with Janusz Jaworski of Chashama revealed that performer voices are still overpowered by the street noise and so the space is more attractive to dance-theater groups (email Correspondence. Feb. 1, 2012) A permanent lighting truss is installed on the ceiling opposite the stage (Fig 5.38). The color-changing lights can be thrown on the white plaster wall as a backdrop to action on the stage. There is no backstage area so performers using the space either need to be onstage for the full performance or need to be flexible in their definition of ‘backstage’.



Figure 5.38: Lighting Truss

Academic Institutions

LAFAYETTE COLLEGE'S ARTS PLAZA - EASTON, PA - *Informal, Art Form*

Background. Lafayette College's Arts Plaza (Fig. 5.39 and 5.40) was originally conceived by the architecture firm Spillman Farmer as an outdoor space to display sculptural artwork, not as a theater landscape. The firm's intent was to create a flexible art display space for use by the Visual Arts College located on the south side of the site. The space is just one part of Lafayette College's new Williams Arts Campus. Eventually, the building to the south of the plaza will be converted into a café/restaurant and a black box theater. The College's ultimate plan is to make the whole block an 'arts experience' that links the college with the community of Easton, PA (Interviews with Spillman Farmer Employees. March 2, 2012.)

The site was originally an auto-dealership and car maintenance shop (Fig. 5.41). The building had been there so long that the general public had forgotten that the flat concrete foundation had a stream running underneath (Fig. 5.42). In a desire to connect the site to the stream, Wayne Stitt, the project lead, designed a raised grate to sit in the middle of the plaza that would bring the sound of the river into the site (Fig. 5.43). Placement of the grate took careful consideration so as to not undermine the structural integrity of the original foundation. The design also paid homage to the site's previous use by keeping the beams and columns that had once held up the shop's roof. This design decision gives the space a 'ceiling' which casts interesting shadows across the space (personal communication. March, 2 2012).

Although the space was not intended for theatrical use, it was described as an 'outdoor black box theater' after Dr. Suzanne Westfall, a professor at Lafayette College's



Figure 5.39: Interior of Lafayette College's Arts Plaza
Provided by Spillman Farmer Architects



Figure 5.40: Interior of Lafayette College's Arts Plaza



Figure 5.41: Building Previously on the Site
Provided by Spillman Farmer Architects



Figure 5.42: Vista of the river from the site.



Figure 5.43: Grate that brings the sound of the river into the site.

theater department in Easton, PA, used the space for her 2011 production of *Ubu Roi*. The plaza was also chosen to represent the U.S. in the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space (an international exhibition that showcases innovative examples of performance and theater design) (Lafayette College's website. March 16, 2012).

Location. The site location is not ideal for a theater landscape. The Arts Plaza is located between downtown Easton, PA and Lafayette College's main campus and sits along a major road which causes serious noise disturbances. The two buildings on either side of the space create acoustical flutter. Security is also a concern as there is a well known homeless encampment located under another bridge across the street.

Audience Experience. After parking, the audience enters the performance space through a high gate with a façade that continues the spatial aesthetic of the adjacent visual arts building (Fig. 5.44). According to Joe Biondo of Spillman Farmer Architects in Bethlehem, PA, the site will eventually have its own set of chairs, benches and tables, but for the time being folding chairs are brought in for the audience. The site does not have a designated stage space, so for the performance of *Ubu Roi*, the scenery was arranged in *mansion style*, with several set platforms set up around the space (Fig. 5.45). The only audience amenity currently offered onsite is the use of the visual arts building's bathroom (personal communication, March 2, 2012).

Performer Considerations. The plaza is referred to as an outdoor black box theater because it is a very adaptable space. The concrete flooring is easy to clean off, easy to paint and easy to maintain. The lack of a designated stage space allows flexibility for each new production. In fact, with the exception of moving the pillars running down



Figure 5.44: Exterior of Lafayette College's Arts Plaza
Provided by Spillman Farmer Architects



Figure 5.45: One *mansion* used in the production of Ubu Rio
Provided by Wayne Stitt

the center of the plaza and the raised grate, the director is free to create any aesthetic and stage configuration he/she desires. The production of *Ubu Roi* did not use microphones. However, according to two of the performance attendees, the sites location (next to a major road on one side and the running river on the other) made it difficult for the performers to be heard (personal communication, March 2, 2012). Lighting the performance was also a complex issue. Because it was not intended to be used as a theater landscape, access to electricity for stage lighting was not considered. Extension cords were run from the back of the visual arts building and across the bridge in order to provide power (Fig. 5.46). The tripping hazards caused by the extension cords, the grate and the row of columns in the middle of the space (particularly for the actors who had to run from one *mansion* to another) prompted Michael Viteritto (one of the actors) to describe the experience as the “most dangerous production (he had) ever been in” (personal communication, March 2, 2012).



Figure 5.46: Bridge that the *Ubu Roi* technical crew strung extension cords across to bring electricity to the site.

CHAPTER 6

Optimal Design Criteria for Theater Landscapes

Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis revealed information on the value and history of theater landscapes gathered through a literature review. Chapter 4 summarized the needs of theater professionals based on a number of stakeholder interviews and Chapter 5 took an in depth look at the design of four current theater/performance landscapes. This chapter will combine the information gathered in the previous chapters into a set of optimal design criteria for the modern theater landscape. These criteria are meant to give general guidelines which a designer can apply to a variety of different site and project types.

The research for this thesis confirms the continued relevance of Waugh's 1917 design criteria for theater landscapes. To reiterate his more salient points: 1) theater landscapes are optimally located in slightly isolated areas; 2) topography with a natural concave shape is ideal for a theater location; 3) theater landscapes should use vegetation to create a feeling of intimacy within the space; and, 4) a north/south orientation is best for sites that may be used during the day. The following design criteria incorporates Waugh's ideas with the research findings of this thesis.

Design Guidelines for Creating an Experience

As previously established, the product a theatrical event provides is an experience. "The physical environment at the performance venue plays a critical part in

creating the atmosphere of the show” (Huang, 2009, p. 935). Instead of a design concept, the designer of a theater landscape should develop an experience concept and then insure that the theater space, and any other areas that relate to the theater, support and enhance that desired concept. The elements that my research findings suggest might influence such an experience include:

1. The site itself. Is it a woodland retreat like that of Oak Grove Theatre in Staunton, VA, or a busy urban atmosphere like Anita’s Way in New York City, NY? What experience is already present on the site?
2. The surrounding community. How does the community feel about attending outdoor theatrical events? What kind of experiences might encourage performance attendance? Would the local population enjoy ‘elegant tailgating’ like that done at Oak Grove Theater in Staunton, VA or would they rather take a walk through the woods with an interactive pre-show as is done at the Waterside Theatre in Manteo, NC?
3. The local theater ‘scene’. If there is already a theater company interested in adopting the space, then it is important to understand what experience the company wishes to provide for their audience. Do they view what they do as an art form or as pure entertainment? Are they looking to do environmental theater like S. Westfall’s production of *Ubu Rio* at Lafayette College’s Arts Plaza in Easton, PA, or are they more interested in performing classical pieces and Shakespeare?

Once the designer has settled on an experience concept, the case studies reveal several areas that are key to promoting and enhancing that concept:

1. Points of entry should be distinctive and be a clear indicator of the entire experience.
2. Sightlines as the user moves through the space deserve careful consideration. Outdoor spaces allow for panoramic views on a scale that indoor theaters cannot provide (Payne, 1993). This unique quality should not be ignored, but as Waugh suggested, the more spectacular views are best in areas outside the actual performance space. What key viewsheds are already provided by the location? Consider how to move people through the site in a way that takes advantage of those views without overpowering the performance. This may require special lighting if the theater will be used mostly in the evening.
3. As suggested by the audience experience for both Oak Grove Theatre and the Waterside Theatre, events leading up to the performance can be just as influential to the experience as the performance itself. Consider what kinds of additional events could be designed to support the experience concept.

Design Guidelines for Encouraging Performer/Audience Interaction

As mentioned in Chapter 2, one of the distinctive qualities of the outdoor theater is its potential to start a blur the lines between performer and audience. Evidence from the literature review and the case studies done on Anita's Way and Lafayette College's Arts

Plaza suggests several ways a designer might encourage performer/audience interactions if such integrations will enhance the experience concept.

1. One possible method is to include a distinctive performance space but not provide a formal stage (for example, by changing ground material in a particular area of the site). If this method is used, care must be taken to insure that the performer is still visible to the audience by placing the performance space at a high or low point on the site (Mason, 1992).
2. Another option is to install multiple platforms onsite and allow the performers to choose the one most suited to their production or to move from one to the other.
3. If the space requires a formal stage, the type of stage can play a big role in creating intimacy. The thrust stage and theater in the round are perhaps the theater/stage types best suited to the outdoor theater because they allow the largest number of audience members to be close to the stage. However, M. O'Connell from the University of Georgia's Department of Theatre and Film Studies in Athens, GA, believes the designer should feel free to experiment with the actual shape of the stage in order to promote interesting movement from a performer on it (interview, Feb. 22, 2012).
4. Height of stage in relation to the audience can also play a key role in audience members' involvement in a performance. Implications of stage height are as follows: raising the stage above the audience psychologically aggrandizes the performer while the traditional amphitheater design (which lowers the performer below the audience) creates a clear focal

point for the performance (Cheney, 1918). If the site is accessible to the public, the designer might consider designing the stage so that it may be walked on by the general public when it's not being used by a performer.

5. The performance space itself should be designed for flexibility in movement and interaction. One way to do this is to provide multiple performer entrance areas around the performance space. Another way is to use various vertical stage levels and perhaps continuing those levels out into the audience's spaces.
6. Interactions are more likely to occur during the day when the performer can easily see the audience, so theater landscapes should be designed to accommodate daytime performances.
7. Seating is another major element to be considered. Flexible seating like the folding chairs used at Lafayette College's Arts Plaza or even non-existent seating does encourage more active participation on the part of the audience. However, this option is not ideal for formal outdoor theaters such as the Waterside Theater and the Oak Grove Theater where the space is in constant use for full length plays. In such cases, perhaps the current trend of creating grass seating tiers with concrete or stone edges could provide a more informal atmosphere than the traditional individual plastic seats.
8. Another option suggested by Anita's Way to encourage the actor to interact with the audience is to provide little or no wing space. Without a backstage area to escape to, the performer would have no choice but to

intermingle with the audience. This option will not be suitable for every theater landscape as most traditional theater professionals view backstage areas to hold props, sets and actors when they are not needed onstage as a necessity.

Design Guidelines for Audience Comfort

As mentioned in Chapter 4, without an audience, there is no theatrical production and so providing for an audience member's comfort is an important design consideration. Research exposed several key categories of audience member comfort:

1. Microclimate and mitigation of wildlife disruptions should be carefully considered. For example, the site location could take advantage of summer wind patterns to help clear insects from the site. If the space is to be used mainly during the day in the summertime, then providing shade (perhaps through the use of trees) is also important.
2. Seating with enough room for audience member comfort should be provided for theatrical events. Theater design standards generally suggest a seat width of 1'-8" with a depth of 1'-6" and leg room of 1', meaning that each audience member will need a minimum of 4.17 square feet of seating space (Fig. 6.1) (Ham, 1972). However, general landscape architecture seating standards call for a seat width of 2' with a depth of 1'-8" and leg room of 1'-2", meaning that 6 square feet of seating space per audience member would be preferred (Fig. 6.2) (Dines & Brown, 2001).
3. As being able to see the performer is a primary design requirement, the Audience's view of the stage should be carefully considered (Fig. 6.3).

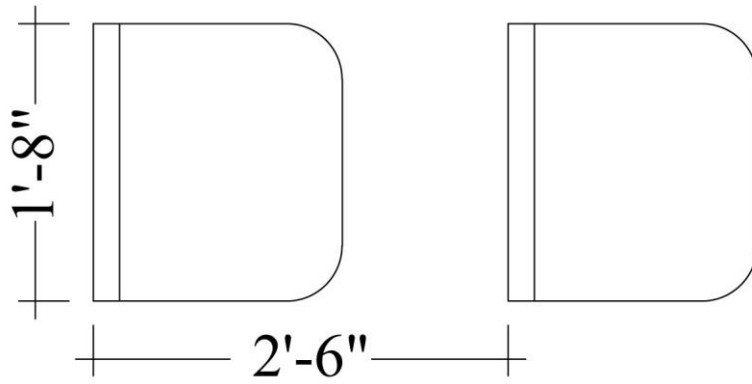


Figure 6.1: Minimum Seating Dimensions.

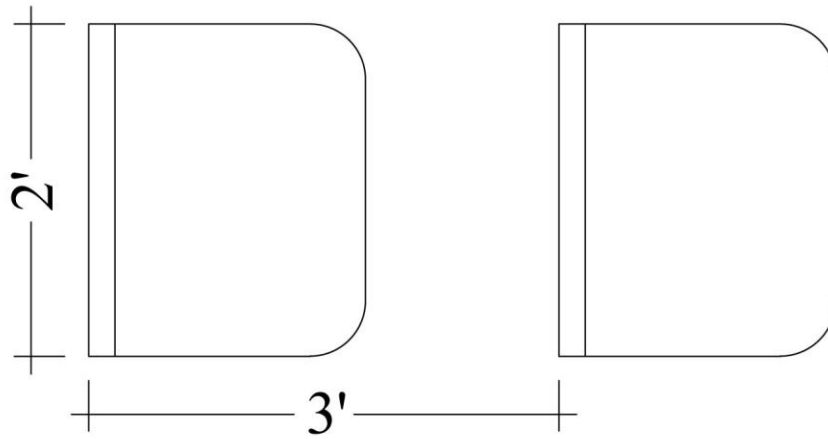


Figure 6.2: Maximum Seating Dimensions.

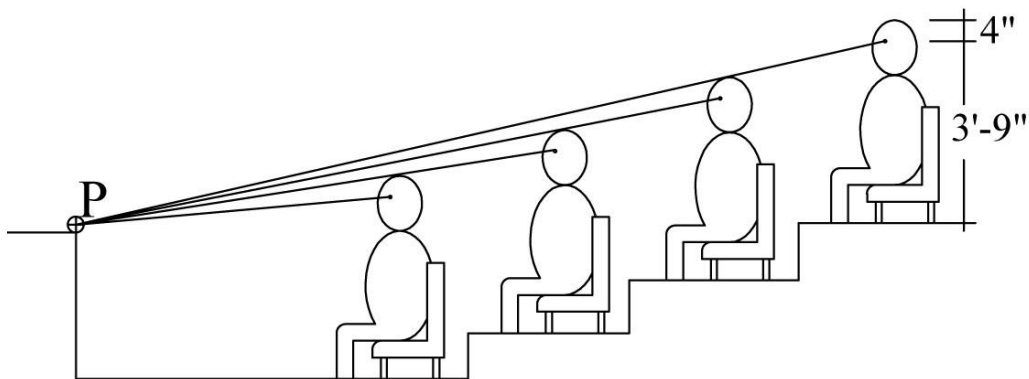


Figure 6.3: Vertical Sightlines.

Eye level for an average sized seated adult is 3'-9" (Dines & Brown, 2001). One method for determining vertical sightlines as described in Ham's book *Theatre Planning* starts with the designer choosing the lowest and nearest point on the stage that all the audience members should be able to view clearly (designated by (P) in Fig. 6.3). The method assumes that the top of an audience member's head is 4" above his/her eye line, then draw lines through the eye positions of each row to ensure that no line crosses the head of the person in front of them (Ham, 1972).

4. Providing restrooms is something that Waugh did not discuss in his book, but every stakeholder interview conducted for this study mentioned them as a necessity. It is the one audience amenity that could be considered primary design criteria. As previously stated, theatrical events can last several hours and it is unreasonable to not supply today's audience with toilet facilities.
5. The parking limitations brought up in Chapter 2 should also be addressed by design guidelines. If installing enough parking to handle a theatrical event is not feasible, one way the designer could address the issue is to include flexible open areas that can be used as temporary parking.

Design Guidelines for Technical Support

The stakeholder interviews revealed three key design elements that a production's technical crew needs in order to function:

1. Easy equipment and set loading/unloading access (preferably vehicular access) to the stage should be included in the theater design. One way to

accommodate this need is to provide a concealed driveway that leads up to the back of the stage.

2. The design needs to provide easy and safe access to electricity as was demonstrated by the production of *Ubu Roi* at the Lafayette College's Arts Plaza where extension cords became a tripping hazard for the performers. In particular, electricity should be available for the technical booth, the stage and anywhere the designer expects lights to be hung.
3. The design should include a technical booth as a place to control the lighting and sound boards. Ideally this booth is a covered space that is located in a place where the onstage action can be seen and heard by the crew, but out of the way of the audience.

Design Guidelines for Acoustics

There are two acoustical issues exposed through my research findings. The first is onsite acoustics, or making sure that the audience can hear the performer. The second relates to offsite noise distractions which should be mitigated by the design. As Waugh pointed out in his book, insuring that audience members can hear the performer in an outdoor setting without a microphone is difficult, but there are a few design considerations that can help:

1. Using topography with a natural concave shape is still one of the best ways to provide reasonable onsite acoustics.
2. Providing a flat wall behind the performer will help bounce sound back toward the audience (Mason, 1992). The reflective wall will need to be constructed of smooth, non-porous material such as concrete, brick, stone,

or glass (Burris-Meyer & Goodfriend). The wall should be at least 8 feet tall so that the sound will go over the performers' heads as it bounces back toward the audience (Thompson & Sorvig, 2000).

3. Mitigate acoustical flutter. Acoustical flutter is an echo that happens when sound bounces off of two parallel walls. In indoor performance spaces this is handled through the use of acoustical panels and by offsetting wall levels. In outside urban environments where existing building walls create distracting acoustical flutter, plant materials can be used like indoor acoustical panels to mitigate the echo.

Mitigation of offsite noises such as vehicular traffic can also be addressed in various ways:

1. Where possible there should be a distance buffer between the theater site and any main roads or other potential noise sources.
2. Use evergreen plant material to filter offsite sound. According to William Ramsey Jr., Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Georgia, the structure of evergreen needles (as opposed to evergreens with leaflets) are very good at breaking up sound waves, and can assist in creating a noise buffer between the theater and the outside world (personal communication, March 5, 2012)
3. A fence or wall around the space constructed of a dense or porous material such as wood can also absorb some of the offsite noise before it enters the performance area.

Design Guidelines for Lighting

Designing for lights is another area that Waugh did not cover in his work.

Because outdoor evening performances create a unique ambiance and provide a clear focus for the theater attendee through directed lighting, the designer should assume that a theater landscape will be used at night. There are two issues revealed by my research that ought to be examined when planning lighting for a theater landscape: lighting the stage and lighting the audience space.

1. In order to light the stage, the design must provide access to sources of electricity and include several appropriate grid option locations to hang lights from. As demonstrated by the Oak Grove Theatre, this does not necessarily mean installing tall lighting towers; it can mean using natural vertical elements such as trees.
2. Lighting both the parking lot and the entry areas should be considered in the theater design as well, keeping in mind that the theater company will need a way to turn these lights off during a performance. This can be done with traditional outdoor lighting fixtures or low level blue lights like those used for the backstage areas of Oak Grove Theater. One other option is to use a luminescent ground material like glowing tiles as long as the light is not bright enough to distract from the show.

Design Guidelines for Non-Essential Theater Spaces

There were several functional space types that came up repeatedly in stakeholder interviews which are not of primary importance, but should be considered if there is available space on the site and room in a project's budget. These include (in order of

importance): rain shelters, indoor dressing rooms, backstage bathrooms, orchestra pit, lobby/waiting space for the audience, concession stands and a green room.

If the designer is creating a theater landscape for a particular theater company that intends to use the space as a permanent 'home', then the need for additional areas such as costume shop, set shop, administration office, box office, storage areas, gift shop and an indoor venue that can be rented to the public for special occasions ought to be discussed with the client.

Conclusion

Outdoor theaters have a unique ambiance that is particularly worthy of study. This thesis takes a look at the distinctive needs of theatrical activities to generate design criteria for small scale theater landscapes. As every site will have a unique set of challenges and conditions, the design criteria are intentionally general to allow for flexibility of uses, materials, sizes and environments.

The examination of historical precedent, existing literature, personal experience, stakeholder interviews and visits to case study sites confirmed the continued validity of Waugh's research first published nearly 100 years ago. However, several things have changed since 1917 such as audience expectations of comfort, vehicular traffic and the integration of electric lights into the theatrical profession. This research updates Waugh's research to accommodate the world's changes.

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APPENDIX A

Stakeholder Interview Prompt Questions

Name:

Date:

Community Theater Affiliation:

Number of Years in the Field:

Area of Expertise:

1. How many performers does a community theater production usually have in a show?
2. How large an audience do community theater performances usually attract?
3. What are the key elements that a space must have in order to function properly as a theater space?

-If you could only have one of those elements, which would it be and why?
4. What are the elements that make a space easy to use as a theater space?
5. What has been your favorite performance space to work with?

-What were the elements (or lack of elements) that made that space unique for you?
6. What has been your least favorite performance space to work with?

-What were the elements (or lack of elements) that made that space difficult to work in?
7. What do you see as being the differences between performing outdoors verses performing indoors?

-What are the implications of those differences to the design of outdoor performance space?
8. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about designing outdoor spaces for theater use?
9. Can you think of anyone else I should speak with regarding this subject?