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Artificial Regeneration: A Metaphysical and Psychological Examination of the Forest as Theatrical Scenery, by way of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

By Cory Aoki Trachsel

Abstract

Stage scenery, in collaboration with performing bodies and other design elements, has communicative qualities that far exceed that of standard, everyday objects. When a theatrical object enters the stage for presentation, under the gaze of the audience, it undergoes a transformation—changing from a concrete, realistic item to the abstract, representational version of that item. In this abstract state, within the larger context of the performance, pieces of scenery may take on new identities, compelling audience members to modify their own perceptions of how these objects are meant to behave in the real world. By examining three distinct examples of forest scenery from productions of Shakespeare's *As You Like It,* this paper investigates the transformative properties of scenic design by applying principles of perceptual psychology (Gestaltism), cognitive science (inductive inference, ecological cognition, and affordances), and Marvin Carlson's theories of haunting—in service of guiding theater practitioners and attentive audience members alike towards a deeper and more complete understanding of stage pictures, characterized by heightened engagement and empathy.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In a theatrical space, through a willing audience's eyes, there is nothing that you cannot transform into a tree. Anything from a series of wooden columns to a patch of hay and branches or even a collection of airborne desks and chairs can become recognizable as a "forest" when placed onstage, though all of these items individually would never communicate anything of the sort. When an audience is confronted with a stage picture that they consider unfinished or incomplete—which it has to be, because a single stage can never physically represent the entirety of an equivalent real-world experience—they complete the picture themselves, in order to fit the story told by the rest of the production's moving parts. Only through a viewer's suspension of disbelief can a number of unrelated objects—constructed, painted, and otherwise organized into the shape and spirit of a real-life, naturally occurring object such as a tree—fulfill their complete storytelling potential.

When it comes to stage scenery, change is not only a constant, but a defining factor. Even in its final form, a set is not fully complete until it becomes part of the larger picture of a theatrical production—i.e., when the presence of performing bodies and individual light and sound cues transform it from a stationary work of art into a mobile one. The more significant transformation, however, only occurs after the piece has left the hands of its creators entirely.

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A piece of scenery intended for presentation on the stage begins its life as a real-world object—an item normally characterized by a variety of identifying features that inform a viewer's perception of how to interact with and understand it. However, as soon as it enters the stage for performance, in front of an audience who has no tangible familiarity with it, it is transformed from a real item to the representation of the item. This transformation, more often than not, requires an audience to modify their previously held expectations of said object: how it is meant to look, perform, or interact with other onstage elements. In this way, I argue that this performative transformation of a theatrical object not only represents a significant aspect of conceptual stage design, it also demonstrates the ways in which cognitive science and visual perception heavily inform the relationship between scenery and its intended audience.

In service of these themes, I explore the communicative qualities of three sets associated with productions of Shakespeare's pastoral play *As You Like It.* Each example of scenery provides a reasonably non-representational image of the Forest of Arden, featuring realistic scenic elements that have undergone visually expressive transformation during their translation to the stage. In each production, I will identify and define core scenic concepts that signify these forests as forests, examining details that are necessary for baseline visual communication and those which specifically augment the storytelling. I support my claims by applying Martin Carlson's theories of haunting, Gestalt concepts of perceptual organization, and principles of cognitive science, including inductive inference, ecological cognition, and affordances.

II. "COULD WE NOT HAVE TREES?"

In their reviews, theatre critics are generally more likely to discuss scenic elements when the set undergoes a change large enough to stand out significantly from the work of the actors, in which case it receives something similar to a performance analysis: how did this transformative moment contribute to or enhance the production? In her review for the Globe Theatre's 2009 production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It,* Lyn Gardner notes the "blizzard of love letters that falls from the roof…[director Thea Sharrock] has conjured a world where love really does change everything" ("Review: As You Like It"). Also in 2009, the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of the same play inspired critic Michael Billington to discuss designer Tom Piper's most stationary and yet most changeable set piece: "But, while Piper's back wall slowly opens up like an advent calendar to give us glimpses of a flowering countryside, the production's real dynamic comes from the shift towards spiritual enfranchisement" ("Review: As You Like It"). Finally, *Daily Mail* writer Quentin Letts responds less-than-enthusiastically to the sensational (and irreversible) transformation that occurs during the National Theatre's production of *As You Like It* in 2015: "Come the shift to the Forest of Arden, where the rest of the play is set, the air is suddenly filled with hoisted chairs and tables and other clutter...oh, all that ruddy furniture hanging down! It makes it impossible to escape the dreariness of the court. Could we not have had trees?" ("A charming tale…").

Letts's commentary, though rhetorical and somewhat cynical, nevertheless inspires a legitimate mode of inquiry. In a theater—a specific, ritualized space characterized by heightened suggestibility—what even is a tree? Evidence of transformation on the stage often relies on the distinction between concrete, or realistic scenery, and abstract, or representational

scenery. In order to understand why an object might start its life understood as one clearly defined thing and end up onstage understood as another, it is first imperative to understand what makes a concrete object concrete and an abstract object abstract. For this, I turn to philosophy.

When a particular[1] (a unique, non-repeatable entity, defined by Aristotelian tradition as concrete and spatiotemporal) is transferred onstage, it moves from a concrete to an abstract status: the object an audience sees has been transformed from a real item to the representation of the item. (For example, the object onstage that is clearly not a real tree but often just a piece or part of one is mentally transformed into the idea of a "tree") (Honderich 379-381). One of the ontological methodologies of defining the difference between concrete and abstract objects—the way of abstraction—states that there are certain shared characteristics between objects that are defined by mental connection: "the referent of an abstracted idea" (Falguera et al.). In the case of theatrical objects, there must be an equivalence relation between a tree in the real world and a tree on a set for an audience member to understand that the tree onstage represents a "real" tree (i.e. external to the production). In filling in the equation of *f(a)=f(b) if and only if Rab*[2]*:* an offstage tree = an onstage tree *if and only if* {both contain specific distinguishing characteristics that communicate "tree"} (Falguera et al.).

It is possible for an audience to recognize a real-life forest as stage scenery, if a performance takes place inside one—but in any other space, it is physically and conceptually impossible to translate a real forest into stage scenery. In the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, mobile and site-specific

[1] In contrast, a "universal" is a general, repeatable entity, defined by Aristotelian tradition as abstract and non-spatiotemporal (Honderich 379-381).
[2] In the context of this equation, *R* represents "an equivalence relation, i.e., a relation that is reflexive, symmetric and transitive, relative to some domain" (Falguera et al).

performance predates venues that were explicitly designated for theatrical use. Marvin Carlson, in his examinations of the semiotics of theatre architecture, states a point that shares similar ground with his concept of haunting: "A situation allowing those producing a performance to place it in whatever locale seemed most suitable meant that theatre could use to its own advantage the already existing connotations of other spaces both in themselves and in their placement within the city, and this was in fact consistently done" (*Places of Performance* 14). In applying this logic to a contemporary performance set in a real-life forest, we now have a theatrical space saturated with the visual language of a very tangible, uncontrollable, and (in most cases) immobile location. Depending on the individual needs of the production, these qualities could either enhance the narrative or hinder it. A real forest, with its near-exclusively permanent features, cannot transform without external influence, which means that a play set in a location other than a forest (say, a house) could provide an exciting disconnect for audience members still holding onto their outside associations of the real, tangible forest. However, in a play such as Shakespeare's *As You Like It,* whose scenery hinges on the equal reciprocity of industrial society (represented abstractly or unrepresented) and pastoral society (represented hyper-realistically), transposing the play into a real forest generally does not serve proper communication of the storyline.

The status of *As You Like It* as a pastoral play presents an opportunity for its city-based and forest-based settings to converse with each other, revealing the effects of societal inhibition upon bucolic liberation and pastoral wildness upon urban order. Pastoral literary theorist Terry Gifford states that "a fundamental pastoral movement…involved some form of retreat and return, either within the text, or in the sense that the pastoral retreat 'returned' some insights relevant to the urban or court readership" (2), while Shakespearean scholar Anne Barton further suggests that "the

two locales can merge, even seem to exchange identities, and not just in the literal sense…newcomers in the forest not infrequently project an image of the urban world with which they have been familiar upon the wild" (95-96). In productions of *As You Like It,* scenic designers generally must create scenery that transforms between Duke Frederick's court and the Forest of Arden, balancing the tasks of establishing two antithetical locations while (most often) taking into account the ease and practicality of reusing scenic elements and minimizing large and difficult scene shifts. To this end, I investigate the ways in which the scenery and its transformations play an important role in clarifying and amplifying significant thematic elements and tone as suggested in Shakespeare's text.

III. "THESE TREES SHALL BE MY BOOKS/AND IN THEIR BARKS MY THOUGHTS I'LL CHARACTER" (Shakespeare, III.ii.5-6.)

In service of the individual visual images that make up the spontaneous, fully formed internal world of stage scenery, it is crucial to understand that associations from the external world play a hugely significant role in visual perception and comprehension: even a false, translated forest calls forth images of real forests in a viewer's memories. Haunting, as defined by Marvin Carlson in his book *The Haunted Stage,* is a phenomenon by which performance and stage properties are affected by material both physically and conceptually adjacent to the work. His metric suggests that older and more produced plays are proportionally more visually haunted than newer and less produced plays—saturated by the long and detailed history of the images associated with each distinct piece or production: "The echoes evoked by the performance are not of previous experience with the same basic configuration of stimuli but of the same grounding literary text and its implied patterns of action, conceived by a

different interpretive ensemble in different ways" (99). As a result, every new visual interpretation of the material begins to demand more variety and more creativity, leaning either into speculative realism (i.e. Shakespeare set in a true-to-life but unusual location/time) or heavier visual abstraction (which carries more of a likelihood that the scenic motifs will not have been repeated in a previous production).

Further, the stronger the imprint (haunting) of a theatrical venue upon society and culture, the more in conversation the venue is with the production's scenery—and few theatrical venues have a stronger imprint than Shakespeare's Globe. Despite the fact that it was constructed in the mid-1990s as the ultimate result of Sam Wanamaker's perseverance in building an authentic replica of the original building (Day, "The impossible dream"), it has absorbed much of the haunting associated with the identity of its namesake, the three-story amphitheatre built at the turn of the 17th century by Lord Chamberlain's Men ("Fact Sheet: The First Globe"). For Thea Sharrock's 2009 Globe production of *As You Like It,* designer Dick Bird incorporated very little external scenery, preferring to let the venue's design provide narrative heft. As a result, some of the most recognizable visual elements of the Globe—such as the vertical wooden pillars—have been translated into a forest (Sharrock).

In this way, The Globe Theatre's status and visual history contributes to the production's minimalist stage design, providing an opportunity to distill its visuals down to only the most essential storytelling elements. Even if audiences remain ignorant of the traditional design influences, general awareness of the historical style of the venue (even adapted through modern materials) firmly places the production within a Tudor-appropriate context, especially when coupled with the period-accurate costumes and props. Furthermore, even though very little information (visual or descriptive) remains surrounding three-dimensional and constructed

representations of forest scenery in Shakespeare's productions, historical precedent suggests that the Globe's scenic designers would have left the venue similarly undecorated. According to Barton's *The Shakespearean Forest*, "The trend in recent years has been to argue that the pillars supporting the stage 'heavens' in the Globe, would not only have been arboreally sufficient, but in most cases preferred, given audiences content to accept architectural columns as oaks" (30).

Frederick's dukedom is a setting characterized heavily by tradition, ritual, and strictly dictated social norms—all of which surround theatre itself, especially within venues that hold historical significance even to the general public. This indicates that the venue, in its largely unadorned state—already participating heavily in the representation of the play's pastoral setting—is also participating in the representation of urban society infringing upon the forest. To distinguish between the court and forest, the wooden pillars are cloaked in or masked behind black fabric up until the end of act I, at which point the fabric drops or is whisked away to reveal the bare wood underneath (Sharrock). This transformation highlights the shared visual language between the two locations, indicating that the industrial world dictates the shape of the forest as readily as the natural world.

Smaller, yet no less dynamic, transformations of the space involve individual handheld scenic elements such as flowers and papers, spread among the columns and tossed into the air. These elements pull focus with dynamic movement, demonstrate variation in color and texture, and exist in conversation with the costume design. Letters, which are carried onstage as props with an important narrative function (Orlando's messages of love to Rosalind are likely the play's best-known characteristic), end up strewn onstage as scenic dressing, evoking a kind of man-made leaf bed (Sharrock). The flowers, in their ultimate placements, represent the true embrace of

the pastoral—as demonstrated by their presence in the marriage deity Hymen's celebration and the joint ceremony at the end of the play.

IV. "AND ONE MAN IN HIS TIME PLAYS MANY PARTS" (Shakespeare, II.vii.142).

Through their interdisciplinary research, multiple scholars have investigated the arts through a scientific lens in an effort to develop a better understanding of how the human brain converts visual stimuli into artistic comprehension. Here, I follow in the tradition of Rudolf Arnheim and Bruce McConachie, who applied core concepts of psychology, cognitive science, and perception to the fine arts (Arnheim), and performance studies (McConachie), by applying many of these concepts to theatrical design. I maintain that these scientific principles remain powerful tools of visual comprehension and communication that aid in translating abstract scenery into representations of concrete, previously observed settings.

Through Hermann von Helmholtz's psychological concept of inductive inference, visual perception is formed through a combination of empirical past and present experiences. In his *Treatise on Physiological Optics*, von Helmholtz offers clarification through an example of transformation, albeit related to performance: "An actor who cleverly portrays an old man is for us an old man there on the stage, so long as we let the immediate impression sway us, and do not forcibly recall that the programme states that the person moving about there is the young actor with whom we are acquainted" (28). Similarly, principles of ecological cognition state that visual perception is formed through the interaction between an individual and their surrounding environment (Gibson 3) and the awareness of what the environment can provide to the individual ("affordance") (Gibson 127).

Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Köhler's theory of perceptual grouping states that a subject is more likely to perceive a group of objects as a complete whole under certain circumstances, such as proximity, similarity, closure, symmetry, continuity, past experience, and common fate. Their theory of contour completion (an expansion on the principle of closure) states that when a subject views an object they perceive as incomplete, they are compelled to imagine its missing parts, mentally "filling in" the gaps (Elder et al.).

In placing a concrete visual element onstage as a substitution for another object (initiating a translation into the abstract), the viewer will inscribe meaning from previous experiences related to the offstage, non-performative version of the object. In addition, audience awareness of a translated object's offstage "affordance" may sometimes create cognitive dissonance—in that the object on stage is not being used in the standard or expected way—leading to a greater need to suspend disbelief, as well as unexpected emotions such as heightened confusion, frustration, or amusement.

We observed such a cognitive dissonance in Mr. Letts's yearning for more realistic trees in the National Theatre's 2016 production of *As You Like It* (dir. Polly Findlay). The "trees" in question—the work of Lizzie Clachan—start onstage as a series of identical desks and chairs, arranged office-cubicle style during the production's early scenes. During Rosalind and Celia's transition into the Forest of Arden, however, a scenic shift occurs—though the mundanity of the term is unsatisfactory here. Through the use of theatrical rigging (by securing the corners of these items to cables attached to ceiling pipes) the furniture rises off the ground to hang in the air, suspended at canted angles (Findlay).

This transformation is not only the most visually striking out of the three I discuss here, it arguably puts the most trust in its spectators, asking

the audience to overturn their expectations of how certain objects are meant to behave. Further, it reinforces the objects' newly established unexpected (but still recognizable) identity by first allowing the audience to view and experience them in their "standard" forms onstage. Realism present in other elements of stage design heavily contribute to grounding the visual abstraction, resulting in a more successful transformation of the environment. The lighting design, in sunny warm tones and crepuscular cool tones, pours through the "trees" from some singular, heavenly source; naturalistic forest soundscapes of bird calls and wind roars add back an element of tangible familiarity (Findlay).

Clachan's design conceives of a pastoral environment constructed entirely from the translated language of society, inseparable from its man-made elements and representative of the unsettling effects of chaos upon inscribed order. Nearly every single element of this world—from the soundtrack of eerie *a cappella* vocalizations to the bright green Post-It notes scattered across the floor and trod into the stage by wandering actors (Findlay)—stems directly from humanity itself. The forest's uncanny silhouette recalls a quote by color historian Michel Pastoureau: "Forest place names are always associated with the colour black, never with the colour green. It's the idea of opacity, of shadows, of terrifying night which takes charge of the nomenclature, and not that of vegetation, nourishment, natural resources" (Barton 3).

The Royal Shakespeare Company's 2009 production (dir. Michael Boyd) also features communication between concrete and abstract elements, in service of an adaptation that places the pastoral and the urban in constant shared dialogue while simultaneously (and crucially) establishing a barrier between them. Tom Piper's design—the only three-quarter thrust in this bunch—features a back wall constructed of birch-colored panels. Though they are rustic in style, they remain curiously

spotless, unaffected by weather or age. Mr. Billington's metaphor is apt: throughout the production, these panels do indeed open and close at various intervals like an advent calendar, revealing parts of a realistic and thus more easily recognizable tree that the audience is compelled to "complete" into the image of a full tree (Boyd).

This application of contour completion and continuity serves to broaden the possibilities of how much "forest" one needs onstage to communicate "forest." The reveal of a trunk, or a single branch, hidden behind a door inspires anticipation for the whole tree, and allows audience members to imagine all the similar elements that form the entire Forest of Arden. When the narrative requires that a forest occur more visibly, other natural elements (bundles of hay, twigs, etc.) are brought onstage in stark visual contrast to the rest of the set (Boyd), indicating that no actual trees need to be present to communicate the measured introduction of the play's pastoral setting.

The production's realistic portrayals of nature, juxtaposed with largely non- representational scenic elements suggesting Duke Frederick's court, together form a set that undergoes constant visual change but never completely switches identity. For a mostly lighthearted Shakespearean comedy, themes of estrangement and deception run deep—and the scenery understands that the doors are more than physical barriers here. In the very first scene, in which the scenery sits in its default state, Orlando de Boys opens a single door and yells through it to express his frustration at a brother who has not yet arrived onstage (Boyd). When opened symmetrically, the pair of double doors in the center of the wall communicate an austerity appropriate to the court, but the many opportunities for (and employment of) asymmetry defy convention in the way that a pastoral setting should. Of Arden, Anne Barton writes: "[It] presents many different faces, depending to some extent (as woodland

always does) on the time of year, but also on the way different characters experience and come to know it. It refuses, in fact, to stay still" (9-10).

V. CONCLUSION

Designing for transformation and subsequent audience perception has the potential to enhance and embolden every step and participant in the theatrical process, creating a richer, more detailed, and more cohesive method and final product. For the architects of the object (designers, builders, artisans), perceiving a stage object as different from its offstage incarnation creates a thought process that bridges two distinct points (what the object used to be, and what the object currently is), encapsulating everything that the changing object has the potential of becoming and allowing for a deeper level of speculation and interpretation than if the object only ever held one identity. Nearly any object that finds itself living a second life onstage will find itself inadvertently communicating fragments of its previous life to viewers; collectively, I encourage us to take steps in honing this communication, making it not only purposeful but prominent. The larger-than-life wooden pillars of the Globe, clothed in solemn black and saturated with the legacy and tradition of many generations; the doors that periodically reveal only parts of the guarded heart of a pastoral environment; the office desks and chairs, performing in a way that no desk or chair has ever performed when in its right mind, refusing to conform to the roles for which they were made: all of these objects, in complementing and augmenting the thematic journeys of the characters in their respective interpretations of Shakespeare's text, undergo thematic journeys of their own.

Awareness of transformation devotes more intentional focus to the process involved in transforming the object for the stage (which the average

audience normally does not see or recognize), decentering the disproportionate importance placed upon the onstage version of the object, considered most "final" or "presentational." If audience members use these conscious and subconscious cognitive processes to understand the visual elements of stage scenery, making an effort to present a transformative (and by nature more abstract) stage object will also engage spectators to a greater degree than if they were presented with an immediately identifiable and unmistakable object with limited space for interpretation—leading to a greater opportunity for audience members to develop involuntary (positive or negative) emotional responses to the scenery and form deeper connections with the storytelling of the production as a whole. In the compilation *Théâtre des Nations,* theatre writer Ettore Capriolo says of "stage machines" that "they have the elemental power of suggestion and arouse in the spectator an innocent wonder like that of his lost childhood" (Yves-Bonnat). The word "suggestion" is key here, as it implies not a single answer but a question with multiple subjective answers. There is a freedom, and a receptivity, to opening oneself up to the possibility that everything in the world holds more than one meaning.

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