

# **The Aesthetics Of Space As A Design Element In Stage Production: A Case Study of Esiaba Irobi's Cemetery Road Production.**

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## **Abstract**

Dramatic plays of several scenes have been the concern of many directors, designers and producers of stage plays. The concern has been in finding the proper performance space and to also gain an aesthetic representation of varying scenes especially of different locale on the limited space- the stage in theatrical performances. Attention has been turned to revolving stage which has not proven helpful as productions are held to ransom for either mechanical or electrical faults. This research paper presents an aesthetic dimension that is economical and useful in educational theatre. The study examines the concept of stage construction in relation to space and in the process further asks the question as to whether space is a pre-requisite to construction and aesthetics. The examination of the case study in relation to theories and models related to the issues in discuss, space have proven to be an essential element of aesthetics, yet depending on our appreciation of its aesthetic contents to really come alive. Relevant solutions were raised to tackle some problems in stage construction and embellishments.

**Key words:** Stage, space, design, scene, construction, aesthetics, embellishments.

## **Introduction**

Many scholars have different view and opinion about the word "Space", its importance and relevance. The astrologer sees space as an area outside the earth's atmosphere where all other planets and Stars are. In Agricultural terms, Spaces define the cultivation of crops. While the Linguist use it to describe a period of time, the word also mean freedom or the whole area in which things exist and move. However, the artist sees "space" as an element of design, of an aesthetic value, an empty vacuum, a distance between two or more points.

Thus, the aesthetic dichotomy between the artist and the above highlighted views and opinion is not in the existence of things, but rather, in the beauty of things as they appear and exist in their environment. By extension the harmony that exists between variables in the same locale, "This is because the people have an identity, a personality and a reason for their existence" (Ademiju, 156).

## **The Concept of Space in Theatrical Parlance**

The idea of Space is really a complex one. It differs among schools of thought; however, one in turn serves the other. Even in the realm of the artist, the concept and meaning of space varies. When the word space is mentioned, the studio artist, attribute more emphasis to a piece of paper, canvas or other grounds of expression while the scenic artist thinks of the stage. Even though both are artist and nearly use the same elements and principles to convey their meanings, their understanding of space, thus, become a determining factor to their varying roles. "It is even more pervading because the circumstances from which they live, together with all of us, have not been (solitary) to their creativity but have also sapped them of the will of self-determination"(Ademiju, 158) to act in response of their understanding of space.

Edward Henry Gordon Craig an English theatre practitioner argues that, audiences go to the theatre to see rather than hear plays. This tally's with the original intention of theatre which is derived from the Greek word "*Theatron*" meaning a "Seeing place". It is of this consideration that the writer conceives, that his play will be seen not heard, "One of the first things you see when you open the script (as an atom material of theatrical production) is the description of the physical environment". (Gillette, 21)

In literary terms, they are known as "stage direction". They are written in italics, in bold, or put in brackets. Whichever way a writer chooses to write it or we choose to describe it; it is the writers' contributive note of the physical environment in which the play should exist. Thus, it could be a forest, or a market square as it is obtained in the first scene of Soyinka's "Death and the Kings Horseman"- in winter or in summer, a sea, a lake, a desert, a spirit world, in Heaven or in Hell, or even in places that have no names. Wherever it could be, the

scenic artist is responsible for bringing these narrations into visual language in space common to both the spectator and the performer. However, Gillette cautions that, "These descriptions shouldn't be thought of as the correct design solutions of the play; they are just one way that the show can be designed" (21).

Thus the understanding of space within the writers' perspective is very crucial, since the script is often the atom material of theatrical performances. Reiterating, Oren Parker and Harvey K. Smith asserts, "Character development or characterization bears a relationship to the environment of the scene" (20). This also according to Yi-Fu Tuan is "Illusionary Space" (241). While the playwright initiates it, the scenic artist actualizes it. And while the former does his spatial "arithmetic" with words, the later expresses himself in the most visible sense, the solid or plastic art. And while the writers' perspective could be equally regarded as the "soft copy" of a whole or of an intention, the scenic artist perspective could be likened to be the solid representation of the soft.

According to Oren Parker and Smith, "Space is to the scene designer what a block of wood or stone is to the sculptor" (61). Ellison Domkap a renowned director and lecturer in the field of arts and theatre studies considers (space) as the key among the four elements that make a theatre including; the performer, performance, and the audience. Lucky Fadama a theatre critic states; "Space regardless of any context of discuss is an environment one finds himself in a given time saddled also with a given activity". Describing space further, he says; "eating as simple as it is, is an art that requires spatial construction" (oral interview). Elucidating, Parker and Smith noted that, "The space in and around the stage becomes an area to enclose or leave open, to light or leave dark, to flatten out or to create the illusion of even greater depth" (61). Thus, "the part success of a theatre production is largely dependent on its scenic rendition by the set designer who manipulates and controls the technical and visual elements of the production" (Ernest, 167). Within these parameters, the scenic artist is without a hall mark of its own, because virtually all artists operate in a space and in one way or the other use the same elements and principles of design to make an audio-visual statement. Pre-eminent to this form is the Musician whose understanding of space is inversely converted in rhythm amongst others.

Each director and designer responds to space differently. Famously, Peter Brook an English theatre and film director calls for an "Empty Space", while Josef Svoboda a Czech artist and scenic designer calls for a "Gigantic Space", and Jerzy Grotowski a Polish theatre director calls for an "Intimate Space". Depending on these variations, one espouses the view of Aronson Arnold who brings us into a lucid picture of what seem the general and the truth. He states,

Every theatre/set is finite/limited. Every stage has a border, (be it Empty, Gigantic, or Intimate) yet it is a premise of most plays that they exist in a universe with finite borders, (which) every play seems to Suggest a much larger world of which it is a part. (35)

Architecturally, theatrical spaces are either indoors or outdoors, a permanent structure or temporary. And the auditorium could either be raised or flat and could have balconies depending on the structural pattern. The performer space may be static or itinerant. Like insects, theatrical spaces come to us in different shapes and sizes. However, one pre-eminent feature that cut across these patterns is the spectator-actor relationship which Llyod Llewellyn Jones describes to be the "pivotal element" to theatre liveliness.

## **SPACE TYPES AND STAGE VARIATIONS**

### **Indoor versus Outdoor**

In the indoor theatre, the heights of sceneries are limited to the height of the theatre roof. Whereas, the outdoor offers the scenic designer the opportunity to grow his sceneries as tall as he wants. If possible until it touches the sky. However, one merit of the indoor theatre space is its acoustic (designed to control, absorb, or carry sound.) nature. Because the theatre is enclose, the actors voice is trapped within the walls and a kind of a reverberation occur, resounding the voice of the actor in what seems to be an echo. Since the original sound wave is still held in memory, there is no time delay between the perception of the reflected sound wave and the original sound wave. The two sound waves tend to combine as one prolonged sound wave than the original. This occurrence therefore heightens the actor's voice. Elucidating this further, while explaining how this principle works, the physicsclassroom.com asserts, "As a sound wave reaches the end of its medium, it undergoes certain characteristics behaviors. Whether the end of the medium is marked by a wall, a canyon cliff, or the interface with water, there is likely to be some transmission, refraction, reflection and diffraction occurring". Thus, acoustics can also occur in the outdoor spaces. This will make us reason why some particular localities have become famous as a venue of theatrical performances such as the acropolis hill within the Greeks.

Performances in the outdoor space can easily be buzzed by helicopters and is obvious that season affects

theatrical performances in the outdoor amongst other things. John Morrison however sees the outdoor spaces as the best. He opines, "Like food, Music and sex, theatre acquires something extra when it is enjoyed in the open air".

Even though season affects theatrical performances in the outdoor, one cannot deny that it offers some merits. Drawing from this performance 'Nwanyibuife' which was performed in the Open Air Theatre (OAT), University of Jos, Nigeria.

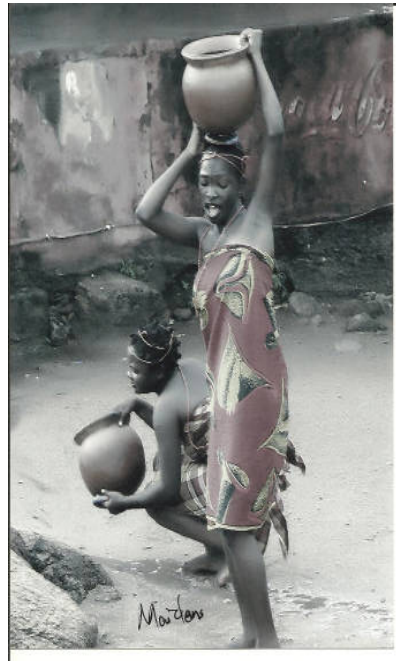


Plate i: These characters also called the maidens; (Adebunmi Tosin on the left as Adeaze and Idoko Lynda on the right as Akunna)

Were rehearsed to have gone to the stream to fetch water (note, the play was operating dominantly on realism). Fortunately, it rained before the performance began and as the water flow from the rocks, the characters there took advantage and made it appear as though they were in a real stream outside the drama which adds to the dramatic flavor. In another instance, as seen in the plate below,

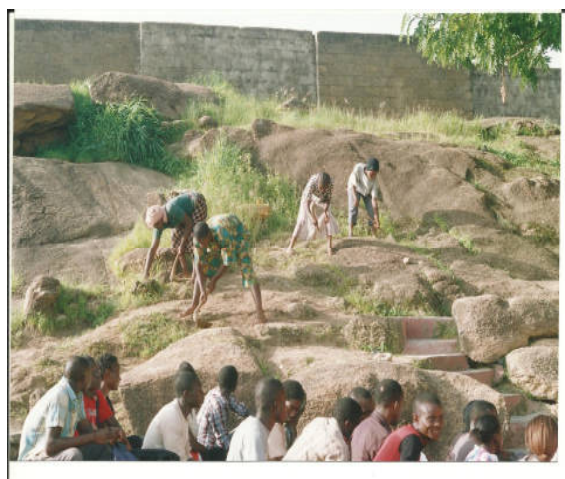


Plate ii: These characters from the play *Splitting Images* are said to be in the farm. who can fail to swim in the current of the outdoor of the production in the environment of the play?

### **Temporary versus Permanent**

The fluid nature of the temporary space is a great merit. This means, the theatre space can be collapsed,

remodeled and materials can be re-used. However, one thing about this theatre is that its security is barely trusted. Out of over flogged materials, it can collapse at the cause of a production. This kind of space is common with the medieval practices that stage their performances on wagons and the Globe theatre of William Shakespeare. The permanent structure on the other hand offers to a great extent the lacking security in the temporary spaces but is not however fluid. It cannot be remodel to meet the aesthetic requirements of a performance especially within a limited time.

### **Static versus Revolving**

Spaces are constructed (especially performance space) to either revolve or static. And while some are architecturally erupted, some are constructed within time to meet the aesthetic requirement of a performance.

The static space is often made of cement and concrete, it can also be made of wood, metal, or other materials but however not moveable neither can it be adjusted. While this space cannot be reduced if its size is too big or be enlarge if its size is too small, or thrust forward if it is required, it lessens the aesthetic commanding of space. And since the space is made often of cement, and concrete, the construction of sets (especially heavy ones) is not re-enforced as it is difficult or not allowed to nail materials to the stage floor even when it is intended to be patched. When constructions are however done successfully on this space, the set too becomes static. Thus making us see one background all through a production. This often leads to a psychological wear and tear, an optical sense of direct attention fatigue. However, the space has an economic value of being built once in several years.

While the revolving stage is expensive, it offers a prismatic advantage for scenery construction. Due to its revolving nature, it can be partition into its number as desired, changing from one scene to the other. However, this space commands a large space thus, it is not economical. And since motors are constructed to turn the stage either automated or mechanical, mechanical faults may occur that might hold a performance at or to ransom. Often than not, this space is made of metal and sometimes wood amongst the numerous materials of construction.

### **Shape and Size**

As we look at subject and object in our environment, the belief is one of the first things that is registered in our memory is shape and size. In children, this is without words to describe. In fact, they are the presuming catalyst to our sense of beauty; appreciation and critic. You will believe with me that one reason why we appreciate some things than the other is as a result of their shape and size. The size of things sometimes makes us intimate, afraid or make us remember them. It is usually the first identity as we look at things and sometimes use to differentiate things. For instance, a rat and a cat both have whiskers, four legs, two eyes at approximately the same location and a tail. Yet when we see them by their size, we identify a rat from a cat.

"Size alone, however is no measure of the significance of the settings in the construction" (Miles Richardson, 222). Shapes play a great ordeal to our senses. Plato called it "Eidos" (shape) of a thing included in our perceptions of the thing as well as those in or has concerns. Comparing it to the Hausa word "Ido" shape is the lamplight of aesthetics. Arguing his point, Plato further explains that eidos include elements of representation and imitation.

According to Aristotle, man is regarded as a "representational animal" or homo symbolicum. Thus, representation (shape) is associated with aesthetics (art) and simiotics (sign) through which evolve the significance of language and communication. Reiterating the aesthetic influence of shape and size, Eheruo quoted in Duro Oni asserts "Two kinds of lamps appear to have been used at the concert ( in other words, theatre) "suspending" and Chinese lamp as they were called and their use depended on the size and shape of the hall"

### **Auditoriums**

On entering a theatre of any kind, texture or form, a spectator walks straight into a specific space- the auditorium. This space can be flat or raised and could have balconies. Any pattern in which this space takes, the audiences are influenced in one way or the other. If the auditorium is raised, it serve the audience right, as virtually all the audience can see the action on stage even the one that is in the valley, i.e. the space that is between the stage and the auditorium. But if it is flat, audiences at the rear are often mask by the ones in front and while raising their necks above the audience in front, distraction may set in and could make the place

rowdy. The balconic auditorium (usually flat and can also be raised) embrace a number of audience which will add the income of any theatre and provide audience with an eagle eye view.

### **The Aisle**

The aisle is a space that is often neglected but could equally be a centre of a dramatic action. This space is like a transitional gulf from the stage to the behind of the auditorium. When an actor/actress passes through, it serves this function. It carries the attention of the audiences until the actor vanishes or comes on stage. This space has a hypnotizing power upon the audience until when the charm is broken and that is when the actor crosses the line (meaning the last seat in the auditorium) or he/she fully comes on stage.

### **Developmental and Aesthetics Considerations**

Those elements that serve the aesthetic of the art of theatre can be virtually everything and virtually nothing. "Even the absence of scenery constitutes a stage set" (Wilson and Goldfarb, 275). Drawing from this performance



Plate iii: Two officer's at a check point.

"April 1421" a play written by Prof. Tor Iorapuu, the characters here are police officers (a sergeant and a corporal) at a check point: tagged; "open your Nyash", on a bare stage. Thus aesthetics is not necessarily "beauty" as it is in the literary meaning of the word in theatrical production. Theatre design is primarily concerned with enhancing the experience the audience can have at a performance. The Encyclopedia Britannica sees it as the art and technique of designing and building a space intended primarily for the performance of drama and its allied arts by live performers who are physically present in front of a live audience. In doing this, (building or enhancing), the designer should not fail to put these into considerations;

### **Crucial Aspects of Scenic Design**

- How will the type of space in which the production is to exist affect the construction of stage? Will it meet the aesthetic requirement and maintain structural integrity?
- How did or will the designer take advantage of the space potentials and cope with its limitations.
- How will the floor plan affect the production, will it affect scenery arrangement and still maintain performance space.
- What sort of scenic material will be suitable for the job
- When used, will it meet the aesthetic requirement of the event and still maintain its structural integrity?

Answering these questions will contribute to the success of the designers working process.

### **The Construction Process of the Stage and Materials**

As it turns out, building a stage is difficult. Offering one reason, Parker and Smith asserts, "designing for the stage means working under limitations of the physical stage" (18), unlike other arts including building and



architecture. Yet a play production does not exist in a vacuum. It commands a space which defines the environment and of the cultures within which it exist. Even though there are no standard processes in design, artistically, “designing sets is limited only by the designers’ imagination or the lack of it” (Kayode, 154). By virtue of this assertion, no designer is however bigger than the environment around his/her mind, he/she cannot do better than the quality of his/her thinking. His/her thinking is however directly proportional to the measure of information and the kind of information that he obtains, live by and live with.

Different kinds of wood were used in the construction of the stage in Esiaba Irobi's play production, Cemetery Road. Each kind of wood varies in size, thickness and in purpose. The stage was built individually as a separate unit of a whole and was connected together. The stage was about 14feet high and 39feet wide. That is the diameter of the stage space. The major scenic unit is the flat. This is composing of a frame over which a covering is stretched. Flats in the play production exist at various levels; some exist as walls (that is flats without opening) and others exist as doorways and windows.

The 1/4 ply wood was used as the flat that was stretched upon the frame. The frame was made of 1 by 3 white wood. Whereas, the 2 by 2 and the 2 by 4 were used as “king poles” and cross bars to braze and support the standing room or the Upstairs. The planks on the other hand were laid upon the king poles and cross bars to serve as the floor for the upstairs. Cleat joints were employed to make the desired width. The stair cases is constructed of planks, cut into desired shapes and sizes, joined together with nails, which create a zigzag platform, excising to the upper room. It is then supported with king poles and cross bars to absorb, retain and maintain structural integrity and characters weight.

Individually, separate units of the stage cannot stand and make meaning of its own, unless joined together. Therefore, ways where thought and employed to assemble these independent constructions to create an atmosphere and also make a meaning.

The stage in Esiaba Irobi's Cemetery Road play production was assembled, each unit to the other with nails, screws, and hinges. Adhesive was a supporting assembling element. Nails of different sizes and thicknesses were used. The 1 inches nail was used to stick the 1/4 ply wood to their frame. While the 2 and 3 inches nails joined the frames to the structure and serve as ligaments and tendons to the entire structural stability of the setting. Below are some plates covering the construction processes



Plate iv: The stage under construction. The set designer (at the center) and the Carpenter (far right) Examining the work.



Plate v: The set designer adjusting the window as it was observed by the carpenter to Ensure structural integrity.



Plate vi: The stage after two days of work.



Plate vii: The third day with the various structures in place.



Plate viii: The Set Designer creating a wall Pattern.



Plate ix: A Stage hand dressing the stage. Mazeli and Somadina rehearsing for the Upstairs scene.

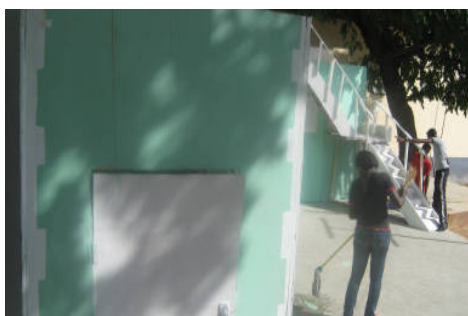


Plate x: The finished wall pattern in completed.



Plate xi: The Finished set. (Four days after)

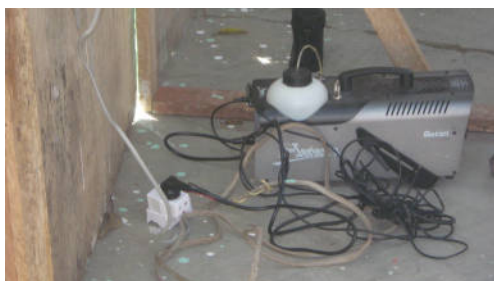


Plate xii: The Fog Machine.



Plate xiii: The effect was tested on the set.

Hinges were used to aid the formation of true doors and windows. The hinges made the windows and doors turnable, therefore looking real and natural. After the stage was constructed and assembled, it was painted green and white, the colour of the Nigerian flag. The set therefore, suggests Nigeria as a whole in the finite and limited space of the theatre. The green depicts continuity in the play's production concept for struggle and procreation while the white, a symbol of peace, making a statement of liberation yet advocating for peace and sanctity.

Knowing the kind of space a designer is working upon, he/she must then take advantage of the space potentials and cope with its limitations. The proscenium space in which the production exists was designed after the amphitheatre of the Greeks. The stage is made of cement and the auditorium is of slabs arranged in the shape of a horse shoe. The theatre features of trees, rocks and other geographical features which are friendly to the environment enhanced the performance of Cemetery Road.

The aim of the production was to create a vivid and a realistic/naturalistic setting of an apartment. The apartment of Mazeli, a University lecturer. The demand was to make a construction which could serve as an exterior of a house as well as the interior. Having several other scenes which is to occur in the neighborhood is expected to be in the creation and hence the natural outdoor features helped I the embellishment of the scenic space. This aided

the demand of creating transitions between scenes without necessarily breaking the dramatic flow. Ordinarily, a revolving space could be prescribed for this multi-staging but the designers' choice was to experiment.

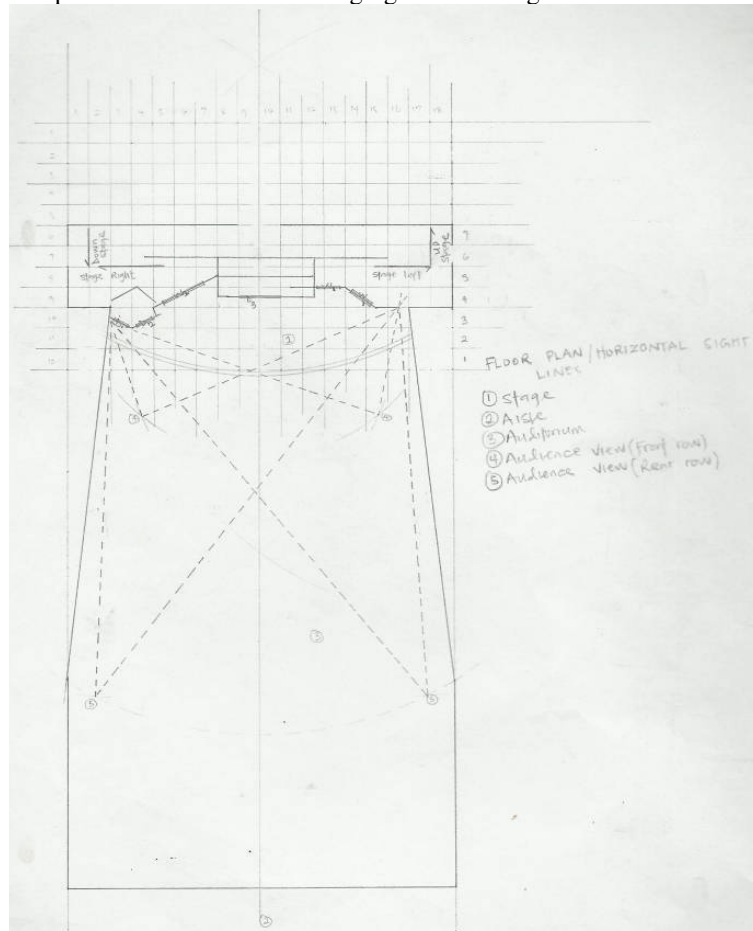


Plate xiv: Floor plan/Horizontal sight lines. Scale: 1/2cm to 4ft

Doors and windows were the major features of this plan. There are basically three doors existing in the floor plan which are named; D1, D2, and D3. The framing of these doors are quite similar unless for the central door (D3) which is attach to the skeletal structure of the set (see plate iv and vi). This was done to save materials and as a creative process for the structural integrity.

D1 and D2 are constructively placed at an angle of 25 to 35 degrees respectively. This is to create an illusion of depth using the concept of angular perspective. Behind it is a wall, which creates a corridor and create a transition of an actor as he/she passes through D1 to D2 (inside the room) or from D2 to D1. The way the doors are positioned provided a visible communication of the interior with the outside. The construction was not just created as an aesthetic unit in space but is created to communicate with the aesthetic content of the space including the trees and the rocks in providing a holistic environment. Another important part of the construction was that, parts of it were done with plain sheets. This shows that materials for construction are not limited to wood; it can be things we know or probably do not or even expect.



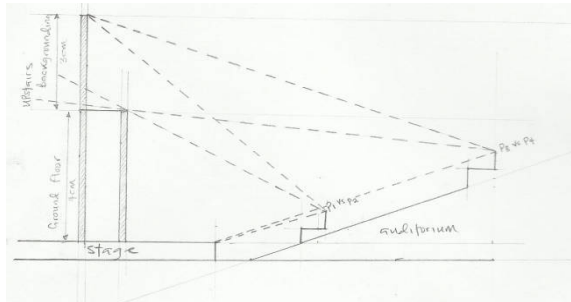


Plate xv: Vertical elevation basically showing the two major divisions in the height of scenery. Scale: 1cm to 2ft



Plate xvi: The model. Scale: 1cm to 2ft

Levels are another stylizing method employed in an effort to achieve the successful staging of the production, the way the space was constructed.

## Conclusion

Before a performance is well appraised, it most exists in the most appropriate space, meeting the demands of the concept in the set construction, painting, decoration, and the placement of sceneries. This however, cannot be achieved if directors and producers of stage plays and designers fail to examine the aesthetic content of any space intended to be used.

Spaces are not really what they are until we develop them into what we want. No space is static or revolving, we simply make them what they are through design transformation and artistic creativity. The static space which has often been marginalized at the detriment of the revolving space has proven to have a revolving ability lying in the designer's creative imagination or the lack of it. In educational theatre, experimentation and creative expression is encouraged. The designer can experience the various stages of designing a set and come out with aesthetically winsome sets for performances at minimal costs.

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