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Macgowan and Innovation in Stage Design

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ABSTRACT: In April of 1919, the roar of the guns of the Great War had only been silent for a few months. Between that fateful November of 1918 and April of the next year, the world of international politics, economics, and medicine would be challenged by several factors. The collapse of Germany, the establishment of the Soviet Union, the wrath of the Great Influenza, and the return of millions of men from the front would transform society in new ways. It was in this historical moment that modernism began to flourish, and it would continue to do so well into the 1920's. The Imperial age of neoclassicism, romanticism and opera was fading while a new approach to art emerged (Cozzolino 2016, 13-15). In the immediate post-war era, each art form had its own innovator or innovators. There had been innovators before, but never in history had the ideas and institutions of the "Old World" been so thoroughly discredited as they were in the Aftermath of World War I. In architecture it was The Bauhaus and Art Deco; in literature cynical greats like Hemingway and Fitzgerald would reign supreme. Dali and Picasso's lusty abstractions dominated painting. All were bridges between what *was* and what *is*. In stage design, the same process was occurring, though the names have been forgotten except by experts. Few remember these men and women, but their influence would inspire many luminaries in contemporary entertainment that Americans would *instantly* recognize: Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, Woody Allen, George Lucas and *both* Coppolas, Frances Ford and Sofia (Fitch 1983, 42-45). One of these forgotten names is Kenneth Macgowan.

KEYWORDS: set designer, theatrical arts, Macgowan, innovator

In April of 1919, Kenneth Macgowan, this relatively unknown theater critic, writer and dabbler in the new mysterious medium of motion pictures organized a moderately sized exhibition at the Bourgeois Galleries in Manhattan. The exhibition was comprised of a few rooms of stage drawings and sketches, some lectures and a short publication filled with pictures and essays from both Macgowan and some of the participating artists. But the size and duration of the exhibition belied its revolutionary influence on stage design and, soon after, cinema. This exhibition showcased his view of the future of set design. The term he used was abstractionism (Macgowan 1919, 6-7).

Macgowan expended a great deal of effort not only on the organization of the exhibition but on the publication that accompanied it titled *American Stage Designs: An Illustrated Catalogue*. In the opening essay masterfully drafted by him, Macgowan carefully explained why he felt the traditional approaches to stage design had ultimately failed, why abstractionism was a superior approach, and why he thought the time was *now* for American designers to embrace it. In this paper, we will examine his style as well as several of the sketches in the exhibition. We will also speculate on their deep influence in later cinematic works from the brooding mansions of Hitchcock to the minimal, dangerous briny deep of *Jaws*.

The Failures of the Past

Writing on the exhibition, Macgowan and several artists expend a great effort at condemning the generation of set designers that came before. In many respects, this kind of sentiment was very common with other artists that would become collectively known as "The Lost Generation" of the 1920's. Macgowan and his fellow writers and artists claimed that most of the live American productions of the recent past were short sighted, primarily profit-oriented, resistant of genuine criticism, and embracing of a ridiculous level of 'realism' and detached relationships between elaborate sets and set makers and the actors that dwelled within them (Macgowan 1919, 2-4).

Broadway's obsession with hits, extravagance and profits kept its best minds hard at work on short-term productions where experimentation and artistic integration was discouraged at best and impossible at worst. Macgowan and others claimed that this lack of creativity and experimentation had created a sort of theatrical community and productions that could only be described as "dead-alive." Additionally, he placed this blame on an almost institutional "system" dominated by the Shubert family and those that sought to compete with them. There was innovation in the theater during the pre-war era, but it was not in the United States. Rather, the best ideas and concepts were being developed in smaller venues, mostly state-sponsored and/or subsidized, in places like Germany and France. Such theaters were less affected by the huge production costs and unstable market forces that were present in the U.S. Writers, actors, set designers, producers and directors could collaborate and work with and off each other to create things that were genuinely new. If greed was present, it took a back seat to artistic interplay. But then, as with everything European during the antebellum era, the war came and halted everything in a hailstorm of state control, patriotism and military disaster (Macgowan 1919, 2,5).

In this line of criticism, Macgowan was in good company. His voice reflected a growing chorus of artists, patrons and writers for state aid for the theatrical arts, and rhetoric drawing a connection between the forces of capitalism in the arts and their role in the defeat of creativity and innovation. In 1901, America's most famous "captain of industry" Andrew Carnegie, who himself would give most of his fortune to establish theaters like Carnegie Hall in New York and hundreds of libraries across the U.S. and Britain, said, "On the continent of Europe many theatres are subsidized by the government, but none by English-speaking peoples in any part of the world. It would be an experiment here, and if so to be made, should be by government as in Europe. It does not seem a proper field for private gifts" (Boston Daily Globe 1901).

The connection between artistic quality and government support was firmly made in the press. Writing in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in 1907, O. Leonard, a columnist, praised Germany's generous support for public theaters. Leonard thought the constant emphasis of American plays on "happy endings" in order to please audiences severely compromised the quality of the overall field. The theater, according to Leonard, was seen by most Germans as an educational institution. That's why people were willing to tolerate financial losses and deficits; these losses were tolerable if they brought quality art, which was apparently the case. The annual figure that Leonard quotes for Germany's support for the arts was an enormous one: about 1.4 million marks. Additionally, he reminds his readers that 'state' support emanates from several levels, from the national government, important public officials (such as nobles) and Germany's growing cities (Leonard 1907).

Macgowan's admiration of France was also echoed in the newspapers and journals of the time. In 1901 *Harper's Magazine* published an extended article that openly pondered why Paris was becoming one of the world's most beautiful and *artistically vibrant* cities. The piece revealed that many of the city's theaters – including its most famous one (The Opera) – received large amounts of state support. But it also mentions the *Odeon*, which during this period was a city theater that took genuine chances on productions, from experimental plays to Shakespeare. "It is by means of such management that the city has made herself, [along] with her many thousand lanterns, the *ville luminaire*" (New York Times 1900).

Another cause of failure in the American pre-war theater was excessive praise and a lack of genuine, vigorous criticism. Decades of vaudevillian theater and profiteering had led to poor theater but luminous, undeserving reviews. Criticism was needed in order to artistically improve. Americans were killing their own productions with kindness and applause. Without some degree of pain there could be no growth. American exceptionalism – that being the belief that there was something spiritually superior, wonderful and positive about ideas and products made in the U.S., had infected the pre-war arts in a big way. Most Americans, even educated ones, rarely enjoyed a transatlantic life and were unable to readily compare and contrast the new kinds of performances, theaters and sets between the so-called "Old" World and New. Yet the theaters of the so-called "Old World," in the years leading up to the Great War were producing superior art (Macgowan 1919, 6-7).

A good example of this undeserved optimism and acclaim could be found in the *New York Times* of February 18, 1900. In its theater-listing page, several productions are announced and noted, *with almost every one* receiving a suspicious degree of ravenous praise. "No amount of competition" apparently effects the production of *Papa's Wife*. The Knickerbocker Theater's production of *When We Were Twenty-One* has "large and enthusiastic audiences at every performance." While the Empire Theater's production of *Brother Officers* is so popular huge audiences "tax" the "capacity" of the building. But not to be missed, apparently, at Daly's Theater is *The Ambassador* with its "splendid cast and sumptuous costuming (Macgowan 1919, 6-7).

Macgowan and his allies also lay the blame for the failures of the pre-war American theater on 'theatricalism' and 'realism.' Theatricalism was the practice of creating dazzlingly colorful sets that outmatched their own productions and, thus, diminished the overall quality of the entire audience experience. Realism was defined as the construction of elaborate sets designed to completely mimic what they represented, sometimes in excruciating architectural and structural detail. Additionally, these sets were so elaborate that they frequently did not move and remained present for the entire production (Macgowan 1919, 7-8).

Apparently, this problem was so common that it was mentioned at length by set designer John Wenger. Writing in the same publication as Macgowan, Wenger told a story of a "recent" New York City production that had begun in an odd but triumphant way. In the first moments of the production, the audience was so impressed by the elaborate realism and hard work of the set designer that they rose in ravenous sustained applause to demonstrate their appreciation for his or her skill. But it was soon followed by the equivalent of an artistic disaster. As the play continued, the set remained in all of its former glory, but soon the plot and scene outpaced the background and the entire production became disjointed and disturbed the audience. The ultimate result was soon reached in *artistic failure* (Wenger 1919, 20-22).

Wenger was no erudite set designer that cared only for his art. He stipulated that there was a direct relationship between how an audience perceived and interacted with an entire performance and the direct financial health of an overall theatrical production. Here he – and Macgowan does it as well – was appealing to the very American notion of *profitability*. The Great War was over and the Roaring 1920's was about to begin – an era when national leaders proclaimed that "the business of America was business" (Sobel 1998, 196-97). Another participating set designer and artist was Lee Simonson. In his essay titled "The Necessary Illusion," he demonstrates his contempt for realism. He saw its ugly head especially in opera, a medium that had, particularly in Europe, long been regarded for its elaborate sets and costumes going back to the 1700's (Simonson, 1919, 18-19).

Simonson recounted a recent visit to see Wagner's *Ring*. In that particular production designers had expended monumental efforts to recreate a mountainous Rhineland forest, with detail right down to the individual tree trunks. Simonson found the design to be disjointing and misguiding. It was so elaborate that the actors were seemingly hidden within entire scenes, with little or no effort to control lighting to enhance or guide performances. Instead of being elevated to a divine plane where Norse gods and goddesses waged battle, Simonson recounted that he would not have been surprised to see a sign for property sales or a trolley winding its way through the mountains. He faulted the set designer for depriving the audience of one of the key aspects of all theater, that being what he called "the necessary illusion." The set had to assist the audience in transporting them to another world, but intense realism was actually counter-productive in such efforts. What was needed were more abstract, flexible sets that highlighted the actors and ennobled their efforts to tell a story (Simonson, 1919,19).

Macgowan also cautioned against excessive use of *perspective* in stage design. First developed in the Renaissance, the use of perspective had long been utilized in the theater to create an illusion of a much larger space, as well as depth where there wasn't any. While he was not passionately against it, he cautioned that designers had become, in some instances, over-dependent on it as a storytelling vehicle. He was particularly critical of designers that used perspective to create vistas of distant towns and cities, as this effected tended to look rather manufactured and fake. It discredited the production and unnecessarily distracted viewers (Macgowan 1919, 10-11).

For Macgowan and his fellow artists and contributors, it was the *combination* of all of these aspects, from obsessively 'realistic' rooms and entire pieces of architecture to elaborate background paintings that resembled a mountain view that suffocated producers, writers and actors in their storytelling efforts. It had to go, *all* of it. The new complexities of modern storytelling demanded it; but something had to arise in its place (Macgowan 1919, 11-13).

The New Path of the Theater

In order for the rising American state of the early 1900's to exceed the achievements of the European past, an innovative approach was needed. This was to be embraced in *abstractionism*, in which was the combination of *three* components: simplification, suggestion and synthesis. These three themes continue to resonate on the stages of the world's theaters (i.e. in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*) as well as in some of the greatest movies of the 20th century (Macgowan 1919, 10-12). Simplification, according to Macgowan and his peers, was not the mere 'toning down' of elaborate sets. Rather, it was the *employment of objects* on the stage, from paintings to architectural features to props, that were specifically aimed at *enhancing storytelling* and *enabling* the actors to tell their stories. The worst thing that a stage designer could do was create a set that would devour the actors, and thus, the moving means of storytelling. In effect, less was more (Macgowan 1919, 13-15).

For example, to represent the space of a gigantic church in an operatic production of *Faust*, Macgowan choose a design by Joseph Urban to display at the exhibition. The set consisted of a single gothic-style pillar with an adjoining stained-glass window that would, literally, set the stage and enhance the imagination of viewers. It would create genuine space for the actors to move around, while at the same time never losing the power of place, or, what Macgowan called, "suggestion (Macgowan 1919, 12-13). The story of Faust is one in which a man sells his soul to Satan. The play tells the story of the struggle between good and evil, light and dark. The interplay between these two stark forces is well on display in the set. The gothic pillar, bathed in light, suggests the saving grace and strength of faith, yet it is bathed in darkness. The candelabra flickers to the far left of the scene, with its candles alight while being overwhelmed with gloom; perhaps suggesting the flickering power of the soul while being swallowed by the forces of pathos. A stained-glass window is also visible, with light pouring through; yet the illumination is not enough to conquer the blackness, but simply to interrupt it (Macgowan 1919, 40-41).

The stage itself is designed in a checkerboard pattern. This feature is pregnant with suggestion. Perhaps it symbolizes the chess-like struggle between the human soul and the Devil, or the struggle between God and Satan, played out in a series of moves. The never-ending tug of war between Light and Dark takes many forms, even thoughtful, precise ones. But this is not just a game, it is with the highest of stakes; souls, even all of existence, dangles as prizes to be won. The human soul is just a factor or indicator, a trinket, a *pawn* (Macgowan 1919, 40-41, Illustration Plates Section). The combined presentation of all these factors creates a vast space where a major part of this story could be told. Actors are empowered by their surroundings in their narrative efforts; they do not inhabit the story, they use the set to *tell* it.

In another scene presented at the exhibition, Macgowan chose a design by Raymon Johnson for the play *King of the Jews*. This Passion Play intensely focused on the subject of the last days of Jesus Christ and especially his crucifixion. Unlike the busy Renaissance/Baroque scenes of the past, filled with color, weeping mourners and elements of Roman architecture, this backdrop is stripped down, yet chock-full of meaning and suggestion (Macgowan 1919, 42-43, Illustration Plates Section).

The approach is filled with stark color, and a clear presence of light and darkness. Geography and fauna are replaced with an almost geometric-like set of structures on which long shadows can be cast upon. The setting is stark, smooth, filled with jagged angles that suggested imbalance, that something is seriously amiss in the universe. Shapes overwhelm the human forms in size while maintaining a level of genuine abstraction. There is little décor. On this stage is the triumph of death, unreason, cruelty, and inorganic starkness. Injustice and Indifference are the rule as the Savior of the World is lead off to his death by seemingly omnipresent political forces. Yes, the audience knows He will arise again, but the point is focused on the human side of the story, on the ground – and not in heaven (Macgowan 1919, 42-43, Illustration Plates Section). Johnson's sparse set is also notable for its three levels for the performers. There is a bottom level that comprises most of the stage, a staircase that is obscured by larger geometric forms, and a ten-foot high level where human forms can be well seen, yet partially obscured. These levels could be employed in a multitude of scenes, whether to demonstrate degrees of political or divine power. Finally, the actual backdrop of the state is one of white light, which contrasts with all of the performers – making some of them into near-silhouettes. All is *minimized* to enhance the power of storytelling; of human presence (Macgowan 1919, 42-43 Illustration Plates Section).

Macgowan was eager to demonstrate how his "New Theater Approach" could be used in opera. To drive his point home, he had two artists display sets from the ancient Greek opera *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Each scene is completely different, with one from the first act set outside, and the other situated in a vast ancient Greek palace (Macgowan 1919, 43-44 Illustration Plates Section).

Designer Michael Carmichael Carr created a highly-styled outdoor scene. Emphasis is placed on openness, even airiness. Little attention is given to the exact edges and elaborate features that typified ancient Classical architecture; there are no elaborate fluted columns or hollow pediments filled with nude humans and gods in battle. Instead there is a simple stone stairway leaving up to an entrance to a home carved into a mountain (probably the Acropolis of Ancient Athens). Atop the mountain is the suggestion of a Greek temple, with its classical features greatly subdued. If this is the Acropolis, the great Parthenon is noticeably absent and justifiably so; its presence would overwhelm the entire production. The surface of the mountain is comprised of light and dark colors and there is no attempt to depict genuine geological features such as stones. Trees are depicted as arrow-like with no attempt to render branches or leaves (Macgowan 1919, 44, Illustration Plates Section).

While we cannot tell if the staircase was three dimensional, it would have certainly made sense for it to be, as it would have provided the actors with a variety of levels to perform upon in their efforts to tell a story of gods, goddesses, sacrifice and last-minute salvation. Staircases and platforms also accentuate the presence of the performers in relation to one other, and enhance visibility. It enlarges performing space (Macgowan 1919, 45, Illustration Plates Section).

One of the starkest sets for the same opera is presented by Lee Simonson. Titled "The Palace Interior," the background is simple yet filled with suggestion and potential. The audience is cut into two portions; the first is almost in the form of a deep, open sink surrounded by knee-high platforms. Also present are gigantic, fluted, thick columns. The scene suggests a place of great authority, one that inspires awe and hierarchy. The actors are present but are overwhelmed by the columns, which may also symbolize the power of government and even divine command. Light and darkness are present as the stage's foreground is bathed in bright light, which quickly recedes into deep darkness as the interior of the palace is revealed. Here we may have the suggestion that even in the play that is being scene, there are deeper truths, hidden mechanizations at work that perhaps are beyond the understanding of the characters and audience. But it is at the same time majestic and omnipresent (Macgowan 1919, 46, Illustration Plates Section).

Macgowan was also eager to demonstrate his "New Theater" principles could be adopted for non-Western settings. For one play, titled *Bushido*, he chose a scene designed by Irving Pichel. Though the play is set in Japan and concerns the concept of Japanese feudal honor and family, we see abstractionism very much at work. What is not presented is an exact replica (or an attempt at one) of a scene in Japan. There are no elaborate pagodas, no bonsai trees, and no lush foliage. Instead we are introduced to a simplified interior of a Japanese home. Our stage is comprised of two levels, a foreground, a short stairway and the main, open level of an interior room. Most actors are situated on or near the floor. There is a large white square in the background, which may indicate a work of art or even a window, but it is plain nonetheless. Costumes *suggest* Japan, but are not necessarily ornate or particularly detailed. Maximum emphasis is placed on the *players*, and they are given a vast amount of room in which to move and tell their stories. On stage-right is an entry way and what is supposed to be a screen door or window; players can easily enter and exit the scene. Fluidity, movement, expression is promoted as detail is purposely subdued (Macgowan 1919, 48, Illustration Plates Section).

Macgowan's Later Career and Influence

After the exhibition, Macgowan would take a grand tour of Western and Central continental Europe, before writing his book Continental Stagecraft, where he expressed his deep admiration for abstractionism across the Atlantic. He would later go on to Hollywood in the 1930's and 40's, where he won an Oscar and worked directly with the master of suspense, Alfred Hitchcock (Judnick 2014, 193-95).

Hitchcock, of course, was one of Macgowan's most devoted students. Time and again the filmmaker would heed his mentor's advice and tell the richest stories with the most minimal of suggestion. Who could forget the terrifying shower scene in Psycho, which contained no full body images of Norman Bates' victim being hewn apart alive. Instead, we got close-ups of the showerhead, buzzing steadily and indifferently while water – and terror – cascaded across the screen. There were no expensive replicas of bleeding human limbs; just the image of blood cascading downs the drain. But it *wasn't* blood, of course – it was the product of a can of Hershey's syrup. Macgowan's inspiration at was clearly at work. Generations of moviegoers would remember the terror of that moment – but the important scene was not on the screen as much as in the imagination (Smith III 1990, 74-76).

Macgowan was so admired that for most of the post-World War II era he was employed as a full-time professor at UCLA. Later, the university not only tenured him but named an academic hall in his honor. He would die in 1963 (New York Times 1963).

Macgowan's minimalistic approach also had another winner in the form of Steven Speilberg, who employed his techniques and ideas in the hit movie *Jaws*. The movie begins with a couple running on the dark beach, throwing off their clothes. The naked woman dumps into the water first and the only thing that audience can see in this point is the shape of the woman. The movie does not clearly show *what* is going on. Then the viewpoint changes and allows the audience to assume that the viewpoint of the camera is showing the perspective of "something" under the water. From this point, the movie slowly builds tension (Jaws 1975). After few minutes of woman swimming, the camera gets closer to the woman as the tempo of the background music increases. Then finally, the increased tension breaks as the woman screams. While the camera is only showing outside of the water, unknown living thing under the water immediately drags the woman. In this point, the audience realizes that the perspective of "something" is the perspective of unknown living thing. Finally, the woman stops screaming as she gets pulled down into the water and shows the man, peacefully lying down on the beach (Jaws 1975).

Although the movie did not clearly illustrate what "something" is, it effectively allowed the audience to feel fear. In fact, showing the minimal increased even more tension and allowed the audience to feel more horrific. And this technique is called minimalism, which maintained throughout the entire movie. For example, the movie only panned blood in the ocean to show people killed by "something". Also, the movie often revealed the dorsal fin – fin on the *top* of the shark's body) instead of showing the entire body (Jaws 1975). Finally, in the very last part, the audience clearly sees what "something" is; the shark (jaws). The tension built throughout the whole movie breaks down in this point and maximizes the fear of the audience. This technique, minimalism, made the movie *Jaws* so different from other movies and lead to huge success (Jaws 1975).

Today we can see Macgowan's ideas echoed from Broadway to contemporary cinema. He is an honored voice that will continue to be heeded far into the future.

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