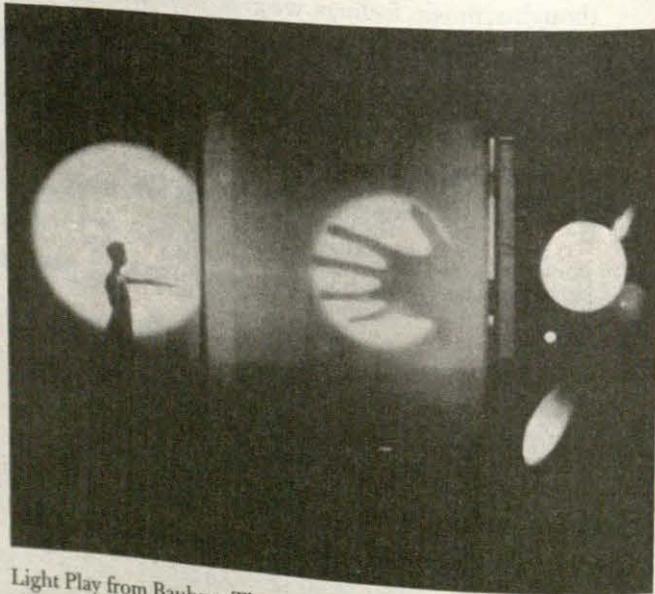


<< 3 >> László Moholy-Nagy
"Theater, Circus, Variety,"
Theater of the Bauhaus
(1924)



Light Play from Bauhaus Theater. Photo by Lux Feininger. Courtesy of Prakapas Gallery.

"The Theater of Totality with its multifarious complexities of light, space, plane, form, motion, sound, man—and with all the possibilities for varying and combining these elements—must be an ORGANISM."

<< Founded in Weimar, Germany, in 1919, the Bauhaus School is best known for its contribution to industrial design. But artists such as László Moholy-Nagy, Oskar Schlemmer, Paul Klee, and Wassily Kandinsky undertook a wide range of aesthetic investigations, using the school as a laboratory to examine the formal principles of abstraction in painting, photography, and sculpture. They also explored the influence of technology, which had a profound impact on their work and ideas. These experiments led Moholy-Nagy and Schlemmer to develop a new kind of theater based on these principles. Their work was an attempt to synthesize the theater's essential components—space, composition, motion, sound, movement, and light—into a fully integrated, abstract form of artistic expression.

Moholy-Nagy referred to this idea as the Theater of Totality, a reinterpretation of Wagner's concept of "total theater." Moholy-Nagy's approach to the synthesis of the arts reduced the importance of the written word and the presence of the actor, placing them on an equal plateau with stage design, lighting, music, and visual composition. His concept of the "Mechanized Eccentric" injected the qualities of machinery into every aspect of the stage performance, including the costume design, props, and movement of the actors, resulting in a theater that emphasized the physical rather than the literary, and that reflected the speed, dynamism, and precision of state-of-the-art technology. It is notable that Moholy-Nagy integrated mechanical motifs in all his work—not only theater but also painting, photography, film, and sculpture.

In addition, Moholy-Nagy's theater challenged the relationship between the spectator and the performance. He called for the use of techniques that would alter the theatrical space, removing the traditional "fourth wall" that separated the audience from the stage. He envisioned mechanical devices that would move across a multiplaned stage, a reorganization of the space that would literally immerse spectators in the action. As Moholy-Nagy put it, the Bauhaus Theater would challenge the passivity of the audience, and "actually allow them to fuse with the action on the stage at the peak of cathartic ecstasy." >>

1. THE HISTORICAL THEATER

The historical theater was essentially a disseminator of information or propaganda, or it was an articulated concentration of action (*Aktionskonzentration*) derived from events and doctrines in their broadest meaning—that is to say, as

“dramatized” legend, as religious (cultist) or political (proselytizing) propaganda, or as compressed action with a more or less transparent purpose behind it.

The theater differed from the eyewitness report, simple storytelling, didactic moralizing, or advertising copy through its own particular synthesis of the elements of presentation: SOUND, COLOR (LIGHT), MOTION, SPACE, FORM (OBJECTS AND PERSONS).

With these elements, in their accentuated but often uncontrolled interrelationships, the theater attempted to transmit an articulated experience.

In early epic drama (*Erzählungs-drama*) these elements were generally employed as illustration, subordinated to narration or propaganda. The next step in this evolution led to the drama of action (*Aktions-drama*), where the elements of dynamic-dramatic movement began to crystallize: the theater of improvisation, the *commedia dell'arte*. These dramatic forms were progressively liberated from a central theme of logical, intellectual-emotional action which was no longer dominant. Gradually their moralizing and their tendentiousness disappeared in favor of an unhampered concentration on action: Shakespeare, the opera.

With August Stramm, drama developed away from verbal context, from propaganda, and from character delineation, and toward explosive activism. Creative experiments with MOTION AND SOUND (speech) were made, based on the impetus of human sources of energy, that is, the “passions.” Stramm’s theater did not offer narrative material, but action and tempo, which, unpremeditated, sprang almost AUTOMATICALLY and in headlong succession from the human impulse for motion. But even in Stramm’s case action was not altogether free from literary encumbrance.

“Literary encumbrance” is the result of the unjustifiable transfer of intellectualized material from the proper realm of literary effectiveness (novel, short story, etc.) to the stage, where it incorrectly remains a dramatic end in itself. The result is nothing more than literature if a reality or a potential reality, no matter how imaginative, is formulated or visually expressed without the creative forms peculiar only to the stage. It is not until the tensions concealed in the utmost economy of means are brought into universal and dynamic interaction that we have creative stagecraft (*Bühnengestaltung*). Even in recent times we have been deluded about the true value of creative stagecraft when revolutionary, social, ethical, or similar problems were unrolled with a great display of literary pomp and paraphernalia.

2. ATTEMPTS AT A THEATER FORM FOR TODAY

a) *Theater of Surprises: Futurists, Dadaists, Merz*

In the investigation of any morphology, we proceed today from the all-inclusive functionalism of goal, purpose, and materials.

From this premise the FUTURISTS, EXPRESSIONISTS, and DADAISTS (MERZ) came to the conclusion that phonetic word relationships were more significant than other creative literary means, and that the logical-intellectual content (*das Logisch-Gedankliche*) of a work of literature was far from its primary aim. It was maintained that, just as in representational painting it was not the content as such, not the objects represented which were essential, but the interaction of colors, so in literature it was not the logical-intellectual content which belonged in the foreground, but the effects which arose from the word-sound relationships. In the case of some writers this idea has been extended (or possibly contracted) to the point where word relationships are transformed into exclusively phonetic sound relationships, thereby totally fragmenting the word into conceptually disjointed vowels and consonants.

This was the origin of the Dadaist and Futurist “Theater of Surprises,” a theater which aimed at the elimination of logical-intellectual (literary) aspects. Yet in spite of this, man, who until then had been the sole representative of logical, causal action and of vital mental activities, still dominated.

b) *The Mechanized Eccentric* (Die mechanische Exzentrik)

As a logical consequence of this there arose the need for a MECHANIZED ECCENTRIC, a concentration of stage action in its purest form (*eine Aktionskonzentration der Bühne in Reinkultur*). Man, who no longer should be permitted to represent himself as a phenomenon of spirit and mind through his intellectual and spiritual capacities, no longer has any place in this concentration of action. For, no matter how cultured he may be, his organism permits him at best only a certain range of action, dependent entirely on his natural body mechanism.

The effect of this body mechanism (*Körpermechanik*) (in circus performance

and athletic events, for example) arises essentially from the spectator's astonishment or shock at the potentialities of his *own* organism as demonstrated to him by others. This is a subjective effect. Here the human body is the sole medium of configuration (*Gestaltung*). For the purposes of an objective *Gestaltung* of movement this medium is limited, the more so since it has constant reference to sensible and perceptive (i.e., again literary) elements. The inadequacy of "human" *Exzentrik* led to the demand for a precise and fully controlled organization of form and motion, intended to be a synthesis of dynamically contrasting phenomena (space, form, motion, sound, and light). This is the Mechanized Eccentric.

3. THE COMING THEATER: THEATER OF TOTALITY

Every form process or *Gestaltung* has its general as well as its particular premises, from which it must proceed in making use of its specific media. We might, therefore, clarify theater production (*Theatergestaltung*) if we investigated the nature of its highly controversial media: the human *word* and the human action, and, at the same time, considered the endless possibilities open to their creator—man.

The origins of MUSIC as conscious composition can be traced back to the melodic recitations of the heroic saga. When music was systematized, permitting only the use of HARMONIES (KLÄNGE) and excluding so-called SOUNDS (GERÄUSCHE), the only place left for a special sound form (*Geräuschgestaltung*) was in literature, particularly in poetry. This was the underlying idea from which the Expressionists, Futurists, and Dadaists proceeded in composing their sound-poems (*Lautgedichte*). But today, when music has been broadened to admit sounds of all kinds, the sensory-mechanistic effect of sound interrelationships is no longer a monopoly of poetry. It belongs, as much as do harmonies (*Töne*), to the realm of music, much in the same way that the task of painting, seen as color creation, is to organize clearly primary (apperceptive) color effect. Thus the error of the Futurists, the Expressionists, the Dadaists, and all those who built on such foundations becomes clear. As an example: the idea of an *Exzentrik* which is ONLY mechanical.

It must be said, however, that those ideas, in contradistinction to a literary-illustrative viewpoint, have unquestionably advanced creative theater precisely

because they were diametrically opposed. They canceled out the predominance of the exclusively logical-intellectual values. But once the predominance has been broken, the associative processes and the language of man, and consequently man himself in his totality as a formative medium for the stage, may not be barred from it. To be sure, he is no longer to be pivotal—as he is in traditional theater—but is to be employed ON AN EQUAL FOOTING WITH THE OTHER FORMATIVE MEDIA.

Man as the most active phenomenon of life is indisputably one of the most effective elements of a dynamic stage production (*Bühnengestaltung*), and therefore he justifies on functional grounds the utilization of his totality of action, speech, and thought. With his intellect, his dialectic, his adaptability to any situation by virtue of his control over his physical and mental powers, he is—when used in any concentration of action (*Aktionskonzentration*)—destined to be primarily a configuration of these powers.

And if the stage didn't provide him full play for these potentialities, it would be imperative to create an adequate vehicle.

But this utilization of man must be clearly differentiated from his appearance heretofore in traditional theater. While there he was only the interpreter of a literarily conceived individual or type, in the new THEATER OF TOTALITY he will use the spiritual and physical means at his disposal PRODUCTIVELY and from his own INITIATIVE submit to the over-all action process.

While during the Middle Ages (and even today) the center of gravity in theater production lay in the representation of the various *types* (hero, harlequin, peasant, etc.), it is the task of the FUTURE ACTOR to discover and activate that which is COMMON to all men.

In the plan of such a theater the traditionally "meaningful" and causal interconnections can NOT play the major role. In the consideration of stage setting as an *art form*, we must learn from the creative artist that, just as it is impossible to ask what a man (as organism) is or stands for, it is inadmissible to ask the same question of a contemporary nonobjective picture which likewise is a *Gestaltung*, that is, an organism.

The contemporary painting exhibits a multiplicity of color and surface interrelationships, which gain their effect, on the one hand, from their conscious and logical statement of problems, and on the other, from the unanalyzable intangibles of creative intuition.

In the same way, the Theater of Totality with its multifarious complexities of light, space, plane, form, motion, sound, man—and with all the possibilities for varying and combining these elements—must be an ORGANISM.

Thus the process of integrating man into creative stage production must be unhampered by moralistic tendentiousness or by problems of science or the INDIVIDUAL. Man may be active only as the bearer of those functional elements which are organically in accordance with his specific nature.

It is self-evident, however, that all *other* means of stage production must be given positions of effectiveness equal to man's, who as a living psychophysical organism, as the producer of incomparable climaxes and infinite variations, demands of the conformational factors a high standard of quality.

4. HOW SHALL THE THEATER OF TOTALITY BE REALIZED?

One of two points of view still important today holds that theater is the concentrated activation (*Aktionskonzentration*) of sound, light (color), space, form, and motion. Here man as coactor is not necessary, since in our day equipment can be constructed which is far more capable of executing the *purely mechanical* role of man than man himself.

The other, more popular view will not relinquish the magnificent instrument which is man, even though no one has yet solved the problem of how to employ him as a creative medium on the stage.

Is it possible to include his human, logical functions in a present-day concentration of action on the stage, without running the risk of producing a copy from nature and without falling prey to Dadaist or Merz characterization, composed of an eclectic patchwork whose seeming order is purely arbitrary?

The creative arts have discovered pure media for their constructions: the primary relationships of color, mass, material, etc. But how can we integrate a sequence of human movements and thoughts on an equal footing with the controlled, "absolute" elements of sound, light (color), form, and motion? In this regard only summary suggestions can be made to the creator of the new theater (*Theatergestalter*). For example, the REPETITION of a thought by many actors, with identical words and with identical or varying intonation and cadence, could be employed as a means of creating synthetic (i.e., unifying) creative theater.

(This would be the CHORUS—but not the attendant and passive chorus of antiquity!) Or mirrors and optical equipment could be used to project the gigantically enlarged faces and gestures of the actors, while their voices could be amplified to correspond with the visual MAGNIFICATION. Similar effects can be obtained from the SIMULTANEOUS, SYNOPTICAL, and SYNACOUSTICAL reproduction of thought (with motion pictures, phonographs, loud-speakers), or from the reproduction of thoughts suggested by a construction of variously MESHING GEARS (*eine ZAHNRADARTIG INEINANDERGREIFENDE Gedankengestaltung*).

Independent of work in music and acoustics, the literature of the future will create its own "harmonies," at first primarily adapted to its own media, but with far-reaching implications for others. These will surely exercise an influence on the word and thought constructions of the stage.

This means, among other things, that the phenomena of the subconscious and dreams of fantasy and reality, which up to now were central to the so called "INTIMATE ART THEATER" ("KAMMERSPIELE"), may no longer be predominant. And even if the conflicts arising from today's complicated social patterns, from the world-wide organization of technology, from pacifist-utopian and other kinds of revolutionary movements, can have a place in the art of the stage, they will be significant only in a transitional period, since their treatment belongs properly to the realms of literature, politics, and philosophy.

We envision TOTAL STAGE ACTION (GESAMTBÜHNENAKTION) as a great dynamic-rhythmic process, which can compress the greatest clashing masses or accumulations of media—as qualitative and quantitative tensions—into elemental form. Part of this would be the use of simultaneously interpenetrating sets of contrasting relationships, which are of minor importance in themselves, such as: the tragicomic, the grotesque-serious, the trivial-monumental; hydraulic spectacles; acoustical and other "pranks"; and so on. Today's CIRCUS, OPERETTA, VAUDEVILLE, the CLOWNS in America and elsewhere (Chaplin, Fratellini) have accomplished great things, both in this respect and in eliminating the subjective—even if the process has been naïve and often more superficial than incisive. Yet it would be just as superficial if we were to dismiss great performances and "shows" in this genre with the word *Kitsch*. It is high time to state once and for all that the much disdained masses, despite their "academic backwardness," often exhibit the soundest instincts and preferences. Our task will always remain the creative understanding of the true, and not the imagined, needs.

5. THE MEANS

Every *Gestaltung* or creative work should be an unexpected and new organism, and it is natural and incumbent on us to draw the material for surprise effects from our daily living. Nothing is more effective than the exciting new possibilities offered by the familiar and yet not properly evaluated elements of modern life—that is, its idiosyncracies: individuation, classification, mechanization. With this in mind, it is possible to arrive at a proper understanding of stagecraft through an investigation of creative media other than man-as-actor himself.

In the future, SOUND EFFECTS will make use of various acoustical equipment driven electrically or by some other mechanical means. Sound waves issuing from unexpected sources—for example, a speaking or singing arc lamp, loudspeakers under the seats or beneath the floor of the auditorium, the use of new amplifying systems—will raise the audience's acoustic surprise-threshold so much that unequal effects in other areas will be disappointing.

COLOR (LIGHT) must undergo even greater transformation in this respect than sound.

Developments in painting during the past decades have created the organization of absolute color values and, as a consequence, the supremacy of pure and luminous chromatic tones. Naturally the monumentality and the lucid balance of their harmonies will not tolerate the actor with indistinct or splotchy make-up and tattered costuming, a product of misunderstood Cubism, Futurism, etc. The use of precision-made metallic masks and costumes and those of various other composition materials will thus become a matter of course. The pallid face, the subjectivity of expression, and the gestures of the actor in a colored stage environment are therefore eliminated without impairing the effective contrast between the human body and any mechanical construction. Films can also be projected onto various surfaces and further experiments in space illumination will be devised. This will constitute the new ACTION OF LIGHT, which by means of modern technology will use the most intensified contrasts to guarantee itself a position of importance equal to that of all other theater media. We have not yet begun to realize the potential of light for sudden or blinding illumination, for flare effects, for phosphorescent effects, for bathing the auditorium in light synchronized with climaxes or with the total extinguishing of lights on the stage. All this,

of course, is thought of in a sense totally different from anything in current traditional theater.

From the time that stage objects became mechanically movable, the generally traditional, horizontally structured organization of movement in space has been enriched by the possibility of vertical motion. Nothing stands in the way of making use of complex APPARATUS such as film, automobile, elevator, airplane, and other machinery, as well as optical instruments, reflecting equipment, and so on. The current demand for dynamic construction will be satisfied in this way, even though it is still only in its first stages.

There would be a further enrichment if the present isolation of the stage could be eliminated. In today's theater, STAGE AND SPECTATOR are too much separated, too obviously divided into active and passive, to be able to produce creative relationships and reciprocal tensions.

It is time to produce a kind of stage activity which will no longer permit the masses to be silent spectators, which will not only excite them inwardly but will let them *take hold and participate*—actually allow them to fuse with the action on the stage at the peak of cathartic ecstasy.

To see that such a process is not chaotic, but that it develops with control and organization, will be one of the tasks of the thousand-eyed NEW DIRECTOR, equipped with all the modern means of understanding and communication.

It is clear that the present peep-show stage is not suitable for such organized motion.

The next form of the advancing theater—in cooperation with future authors—will probably answer the above demands with SUSPENDED BRIDGES AND DRAW-BRIDGES running horizontally, diagonally, and vertically within the space of the theater; with platform stages built far into the auditorium; and so on. Apart from rotating sections, the stage will have movable space constructions and DISLIKE AREAS, in order to bring certain action moments on the stage into prominence, as in film "close-ups." In place of today's periphery of orchestra loges, a runway joined to the stage could be built to establish—by means of a more or less caliper-like embrace—a closer connection with the audience.

The possibilities for a VARIATION OF LEVELS OF MOVABLE PLANES on the stage of the future would contribute to a genuine organization of space. Space will then no longer consist of the interconnections of planes in the old meaning, which was able to conceive of architectonic delineation of space only as an en-

closure formed by opaque surfaces. The new space originates from free-standing surfaces or from linear definition of planes (WIRE FRAMES, ANTENNAS), so that the surfaces stand at times in a very free relationship to one another, without the need of any direct contact.

As soon as an intense and penetrating concentration of action can be functionally realized, there will develop simultaneously the corresponding auditorium ARCHITECTURE. There will also appear COSTUMES designed to emphasize function and costumes which are conceived only for single moments of action and capable of sudden transformations.

There will arise an enhanced *control* over all formative media, unified in a harmonious effect and built into an organism of perfect equilibrium.

—TRANSLATED BY ARTHUR S. WENSINGER

Dick Higgins

“Intermedia” (1966)

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Dick Higgins (second from left) performing Philip Corner's "Piano Activities." Courtesy of Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.

"The Happening developed as intermedium, an uncharted land that lies between collage, music, and the theater. It is not governed by rules; each work determines its own medium and form according to its needs."