Digital Technology in Theatre

Introduction

Theatre is an art form that has been participated in, studied, and enjoyed for centuries. Just like any other art form, it has been influenced and changed dramatically through the growth of technology. Like Karen Moltenbrey states in “Digital-Age Theatre,” an article on theatrical productions integrating digital technology,

“Theatrical productions have spread to virtually every way to reflect the culture of each place and time. Yet several aspects of the productions – including the static nature of the stage environments and the ‘single-medium’ nature of the performances – have remained fundamentally the same” (Moltenbrey).

Even considering the difference between theatre in Shakespeare’s time compared to now is an incredible change. The lack of electricity and thus lighting and sound production is astonishing to think about. Today lights and sound in theatre are expected and, too often, taken for granted. Especially since the implementation of digital technology, these technological elements have shaped the art of theatre. Moltenbrey, in “Digital-Age Theatre,” continues by stating,

“Now even these facets of the performing arts are undergoing a dramatic transformation, as theatre artists and producers adapt to one of the most significant cultural influences in history – computer-based multimedia technology and its pervasive integration into our information and entertainment industries” (Moltenbrey).
So much can be done to the theatricality based on technological choices. From sound effects to music in transitions and from lights that differentiate night/day to colored lights that convey specific emotions, technology is crucial to play production. Digital technology has significantly impacted theatre in staging and production through the emotional response that they evoke from the audience.

**Lighting**

*Technical*

When thinking about technology in theatre, one of the first aspects that comes to mind is lighting. As it is a crucial part of the production, the lighting can make or break a performance. Anyone who is an avid theatre participant can recognize how distracting bad lighting can be. It can pull a lot of focus off of the actors, especially when it is an issue that could have been helped, such as the wrong light being brought up or a spotlight not following the correct actor. Of course, while bad lighting can be very frustrating, good lighting can change the entire performance. From a technological viewpoint, lighting is important for the audience to see the action onstage. As a techie in high school, I always used to joke that without me running lights, no one would even be able to see everyone acting, so who had the more important job? Of course, the average lighting in theatre does so much more than just illuminate the actors. It can also differentiate between night and day. Again, this does not seem extremely important, but, depending on the play, it can be crucial to the performance. A lack of differentiation can distract and even confuse the audience, which means that they may not be able to focus on the message of the script itself. The average production’s lighting also helps to focus the audience. Only lighting up certain parts of the stage can point out one location from another and portrays where the important action is.
Creative Lighting is extremely important from a creative standpoint as well. There are many different ways to use lighting in a production that go farther than just lighting the stage and indicating the scene. Lights can be flashed and flickered to create an air of confusion or horror. They can also spin to portray a storm or rushing water. Another creative form of lighting that can be used in a theatrical production is colored lights. While these lights are often used to distinguish settings as being either indoors or outdoors, they also play a vital role in a production in that they convey emotion. Though there are many studies on color theory, it is obvious to most that different colors affect us differently. Just like advertisers may use certain colors to create a response from consumers, theatre productions do essentially the same thing. When staging a play, it is necessary to draw the audience in to respond and interact with the performance. Part of doing so is in evoking an emotional response. Using various colors and color combinations that correspond with the emotion in the given scene is a primary way of doing this. For example, a love scene would generally use light reds and blues, even combined to make a purple hue. A sad scene on the other hand would probably use heavy greens or blues to indicate dreariness in the atmosphere. Intense, angry, or dramatic scenes generally use dark red as it shows the darkness in the air. An example that comes to mind is from a performance that I was a part of in high school of Arthur Miller’s All My Sons. In order to bring another level of dramatics to the performance, we deviated from the script somewhat at the end. Instead of having Joe’s suicide unseen inside the house, we had him kill himself onstage. When he “pulled the trigger,” we slammed a piece of wood on the floor, dropped the regular lights, and slowly faded the red lights up. They then stayed up just long enough for the audience to grasp what had happened and then we faded them out slowly. The use of red lights in this case not only portrayed the horror of the death, but also
symbolized the blood that had been spilled. In this case, red lights caused an emotional response of shock from the audience.

*Rhetorical*

Rhetorically, lighting in a theatre production is very important. It takes the performance to another level with the audience. Of course, a play can be done with just the house lights up, but it will not bring about the same amount of emotion and depth as it would with a well-choreographed lighting. Lighting, as I’ve mentioned earlier, conveys a great deal of emotion. It shows the audience both how they should feel about the scene that just happened or is happening and how they should feel about the scene coming up next. Along with emotion, lights are significant in the audience’s willful suspension of disbelief. Since the various forms of lighting evoke emotion within each audience member, they are also drawn in to the story and thus hold to their suspension of disbelief. They know that what they are seeing is not real, but they allow themselves to be pulled in nonetheless. Lighting is a significant way to do so in that it makes the action onstage appear closer to reality. Though the actors are portraying real emotions themselves, it is the confirmation of such feelings through the lighting that keeps the audience engaged. The choice of lighting is a clear rhetorical choice. As a producer, performer, or even a techie, planning the lighting of a production is to essentially focus the emotion of the audience and thus influencing their decision to suspend their disbelief for the sake of the performance.

*Sound*

*Technical*

Another element of technology that is crucial to a theatrical production is sound. Sound is a factor that is taken for granted in nearly every context, even in movies. We rarely notice sound effects and music because we expect it to be there. It has translated so much into our everyday lives that we often imagine theme music playing in the background of certain situations in real
life. In theatre, sound can be very important to the production, whether through sound effects or simply music. Producing sound is also crucial to a performance. Even if you are only using an IPod connected to a couple of amps, such as in my very small high school, timing with sound is absolutely everything. Using the wrong sound effects or music can not only throw off the timing of the play, but also confuse the actors on stage. Unlike with lighting, music and sounds are often cues for the actors for certain lines and even for walking onstage. If there is no sound, or it is the wrong sound, the entire production can be thrown off. On the other hand, perfectly executed sound can dramatically increase the performance value. Sounds, for the most part, are meant to seem unnoticed. If each sound in a production happens exactly when it is supposed to and the actors remain unencumbered by it, that is a near perfect performance. In a very technical sense, sound is used either as sound effects or as actual music. Sound effects, specifically those prerecorded and played back, are used generally to portray something that happens offstage, whether as a crash to show that something bad has happened or even as a baby crying to indicate that someone needs to leave the stage. Music is often used to transition from one scene to the next.

Creative
Creatively, sound is used in many different ways. In the form of sound effects, they are most often used for humor. Sound effects can show what is happening offstage, but they can also simply be used as random sounds that help the actor hit the punchline of a joke. Sound effects add a lot to the dramatics of the production as well. They can be used in nearly any way that can be imagined. Along with humor, sound effects can be used to create sounds that may be difficult to produce, such as creaking doors, gunshots, or door slams. With limited staging and set options, using prerecorded sound effects add another layer onto the production. For example, in “Constellation of Imagined Theatres” Daniel Sack says, “Technology augments performance
with another layer of expression, not as an additional surface across which stimulation might play, but as a depth revealed” (Sack, 380). Of course the audience can imagine the sounds that would happen within a given story, but it is so much more dramatic to actually hear them.

Another form of sound effects that are not music and are not individual sounds are noise tracks. These help to illustrate the setting onstage. For example, if the characters are meant to be in a coffee shop, you may put a track in the background of people talking and bustling about. If they are in a playground or at a park, you may have a track with children laughing and yelling. Though subtle and not necessarily a need in a production, these small tracks add a clearer definition to the setting in a scene. They can also change the atmosphere of the scene. For example, if you want to portray a quiet walk outside, you might use a track of birds chirping or leaves rustling. On the same note, you can create an eerie mood with rustling leaves or loud wind.

Another form of sound that is used in theatrical production is music, both within each scene and in the transitions. Music used within a scene is generally used to convey a certain emotion to the audience. For example, in junior high, I worked on tech for our high school production of Sending Down the Sparrows by Laura Lundgren Smith. In this play about the Hitler Youth and the euthanasia of mentally and physically disabled citizens in World War II, there is a brutal scene where the main characters, Hitler Youths, beat a homeless man to death on the street. During this scene, which also had nothing but red lights up, we played Carl Orff’s “O Fortuna,” which is incredibly intense and quite terrifying. Using this song not only showed the seriousness of the scene, but it also made clear to the audience how terrible the entire context of the play itself was. Music used between scenes is used for several reasons. One reason is to avoid silence while scenes are switching. Music keeps the audience engaged without pulling them out
of the story at each scene change. Often the sets are being moved and switched around in between each scene and without music such movement would be extremely distracting to the audience. More so than that, music also smoothly brings the emotion from one scene to another either by setting up the new scene or confirming the previous one. Generally, if there is a particularly sad scene, the transition after would involve a sad song to replicate the emotion of the scene.

*Rhetorical*

Rhetorically, music and sound choice is incredibly significant to the performance of a play. As for sound effects, they are chosen in an effort to add to the existing performance. Sound effects may not be completely necessary to the actual staging of a play, but, if used correctly, they can make a great difference in that they can add a dynamic element. The rhetorical purpose of using sound effects in a theatrical production is basically to create a better flow. When the tech crew and actors do not have to stop and make the sound effects themselves, they are able to focus on their main job. Thus, their attention is not divided. As for the rhetorical purpose of actual music in a production, music is chosen carefully in order to convey specific emotions. Either it readies the audience for the emotion of the upcoming scene, or it signifies the emotion of the previous scene. Either way, music is used in theatre to lead the audience emotionally.

Music is a significant tool for evoking emotion in any given situation. Nearly everyone has certain songs that bring back specific memories. Using music in a production plays off of that response heavily in order to engage the audience at a deeper level.

*Examples*

A prime example of how both lighting and sound significantly affect a theatrical production is in Jim Leonard Jr.’s *The Diviners*. In *The Diviners*, the main character, Buddy Layman is a young boy who is deathly afraid of water, due to his mother’s having drowned when
he was a baby. Buddy panics at the sight or sound of water and cannot even bathe. One day C.C. Showers, an old preacher that left the church and is looking for work, comes in to town. While the citizens hope that he came to be their new preacher, he refuses saying that he is not a part of the church anymore. He quickly takes an interest in Buddy and befriends him. Eventually, C.C. convinces Buddy to bathe in the local river. While easing Buddy into the river, some people from town see what is happening and assume that C.C. is baptizing him and run towards them while singing hymns. C.C. tries to make them leave but no one will listen. In the midst of C.C. screaming at the townspeople, Buddy slips from C.C.’s grasp and is pulled away by the river’s current. C.C. tries to swim after him, but by the time he grabs him and pulls him above the water, Buddy is already dead.

This heart wrenching scene is incredibly difficult to produce, especially in smaller theatre settings that may not have wiring and suspension capabilities. In order to depict the drowning scene, which is difficult no matter what theatre company you are with, a common choice is in using spinning blue lights. When Buddy begins to drown, the blue lights come up and spin, imitating rushing water. When he is meant to be coming up for air, the blue lights are immediately brought down while the main stage lights come up. As he goes back under the water, the lights switch quickly again. Each time that the blue lights come on, the action on stage is meant, per the stage directions, to be in slow motion, as if underwater. When the regular lights come back up and the blue lights cut out, the action goes back to normal speed. This change is not only meant to somewhat disorient the audience, but also show the chaos happening in such a terrible situation. Along with lights, *The Diviners* also uses sound in the drowning scene to add to the emotional weight. While the action onstage is underwater, the script calls for a loud track of rushing water to be played. When the action moves back to being on land, the track stops and
the actors go back to speaking their lines. This track is meant to disorient the audience, in a way. Having an abrupt switch from screaming, yelling, and chaos onstage to near dead silence apart from the rushing water is shocking as causes a panic response in the audience.

**Conclusion**

Technology has significantly impacted theatrical productions in the evocation of and emotional response from the audience. For example, in the article “New Technology, New Technicians, and an Ancient Art,” Paul Court says, “The theatre is an intensely practical art form, and, as practitioners, we are quick to incorporate any new technology that becomes available and adapt it to serve our artistic intent” (Court, 44). The desired outcome of a theatrical performance is for the audience to have been thoroughly engaged and emotionally connected to the play. This engagement goes so much further than laughing at the jokes or clapping when they are supposed to. Engagement is focusing on the story being told while finding yourself as a part of the performance. The best types of plays are the ones that you do not even realize you are watching a performance. Emotionally, feeling as though you are a part of the story creates a connection to it. Though this connection is possible to produce without technology in the performance, it is much more difficult. As in “Postdigital Performance,” Matthew Causey says, “It is unimportant to worry over what technology is used onstage or within any aesthetic exercise – digital, analog, holographic, or naked presence. Now, the question resides not in the type or aesthetic use of technology, but in learning to think like a machine, digitally, or risk obsolescence” (Causey, 440).

Lights and sound naturally draw out emotions and help to confirm the audience’s emotion or prepare them for what is to come. Technology plays a crucial role in production and performance in the theatre.
Works Cited


Works Referenced
