Scenography and Lighting Annotation

In their introduction to *Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design* (2017), McKinney & Palmer define scenography as a ‘mode of encounter and exchange founded on spatial and material relations between bodies, objects and environments…scenography is multi-sensorial and dynamic, both responsive to and constitutive of dramatic action’ (2, 5). Expanded scenography, then, concerns itself with ‘the potential of the material in performance; meanwhile, the affective register that emerges is is in part a result of this new-found appreciation of materials and what they can do’ (13). For my purposes here, materials include light, the venue’s own architectural parameters, and spectatorial positioning, though the particularly alchemical nature of intimate or small-scale performances like *Ballad of Isosceles* [*B of I*] echo McKinney & Palmer’s of spectators as materials whose presence ‘becomes part of it in its expansion’ (ibid.).

Scenography as a field historically concerns itself with the ways in which space and materials shape the spectator’s field of experience. McKinney & Palmer’s project charts the ways in which experiments by mid-20th century modernists such as Brecht, Kantor and Grotowski inside the black-box theatre space paved the way for work from site-specific productions by artists such as Brith Gof and Richard Schechner (5-6). Particularly interesting to McKinney and Palmer is Arnold Aronson’s ‘environmental scenography’ (1981) which takes into account ‘the framing and positioning of the audience’ and sees it as key to ‘govern[ing] the haptic, proxemic and essentially experimentation dimension of performance’ (2017: 6) – an expansion, one might argue, on Schechner’s theory of environmental theater from the 1960s. These shifts ‘helped dismantle the kinds of viewing relationships that had been established through the 18th and 19th centuries by theatre architecture that disciplined the gaze of the audience towards a picture frame’ (ibid.) I am particularly interested here in how scenography’s historical development has worked in tandem with a development in ways of seeing (and the allusion to John Berger’s Ways or Seeing is purposeful). Aronson (1991) suggests that ‘postmodern design…requires an perceptual interruption’ while also needing ‘the unity and cohesion of a frame to encompass it (p. 13). Elsewhere McKinney (2012, p. 16) has argued that ‘immersive scenographic performance there is often an invitation to engage in an open-ended experience of sensing and feeling through imaginative engagement with the material qualities of the environment’, and I would argue that these material qualities include the particular positioning and isolation of spectators in a one-to-one or small-capacity performance environment.

How can scenography alter the viewing relationship in a 1-2-1 or small-capacity performance so that it moves beyond its frequent convention (or ‘frame’, to use Aronson’s term) of close physical proximity to the performer often characterised by table-side exchange? How can scenography invite a more epic and distanced mode of encounter into the small-scale performance while building in this ‘interruption’ demanded by Aronson? Following these developments in scenographic thinking and in particular the work of Gernot Böhme, who proposes atmospheres as ‘“tuned” spaces’ (2013, p. 5), how might I create an ‘atmosphere’ particularly suited to the piece’s thematic concerns of looking, being looked at, the cabaret club and the mechanics of envy (and love triangles in particular)?

(**Bleeker here.**

Relationality, affectivity and materiality are three terms central to McKinney’s and Palmer’s

2017 summation of ‘expanded scenography’, and each is relevant to my own project in a different way. Relationality concerns the ways in which such expanded scenography new and re-imagined intersubjective exchanges can occur (2017, p. 8); the insight here is into how positioning spectators in a particular physical relation in space can shape phenomenological experience and atmosphere. In the Ballad of Isosceles’s case, placing one spectator at a 45-degree angle to one other spectator 1.8 metres away and performing directly to the two key spectators in turn sets them into a very particular relation with each other. The ‘expanded scenography’ of the piece sets the two primary audience members into a relation of competition and partial access, of voyeur and victim, as these two are all the while watched by a larger block of ‘shadow’ audience. I can measure my own intention for this relation and the shared intention of my two key collaborators (Langthorne and Gregory) but the third phase of this project will permit me to determine how the scenography has shaped and activated relation from a spectator’s perspective. Affectivity, meanwhile, focuses on ‘the ways in which scenography engages the attention of spectators’ through spatial, imagistic and material manipulation (2017, p. 10). I have written about affect in my Methodology and Theme section but the methodological interest here is in capturing the undulations of feeling that occur in response to key shifts in the scopic and spatial fields of perception. McKinney and Palmer acknowledge the durational impact of this particular category – affect might accumulate over time (11), and I explore this in the reflection that follows. Maaike Bleeker suggests that many makers lay claim to their work as ‘a practice of thinking….[that] takes shape and proceeds through the means of the theatre’ and what follows attempts to show ‘thinking as a material practice’ (2017, p. 126, 127) through accounts of my studio practice with Langthorne and performance experience at SLAP York.

Christopher Baugh writes that the revolutionary effect of adding electrical light to theatre in the early 20th century “revealed quite graphically that the theatre was essentially a form that happened in time, and that furthermore its revelation through time involved movement, and that movement was created by, and in turn would create, rhythm’ (2013: 93-94, emphasis added). Baugh’s scholarship in Theatre, Performance and Technology: The Development and Transformation of Scenography reveals that the early experiments of Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig at the turn of the century made way for new revelations about light’s ability to shape theatrical time and space. Appia in particular insisted that ‘the actual forms and means, including light, of theatrical presentation should become the content. In this way theatrical production could acquire meaning and expressive significance in its own right, not simply as a transliteration or interpretation of a pre-existing dramatic idea’ (102-103). Despite lighting design becoming a viable and independent art within the world of theatre throughout the 20th and 21st century, this statement’s radical nature remains relevant today. How can light, as Appia (in Baugh) suggests, produce meaning that is parallel to but not dependent on a piece’s textual content?

In her PhD thesis ‘Scenographic Light: Towards an Understanding of Expressive Light in Performance (2018), Katherine Graham coins the term ‘scenographic light’ to describe ‘an affective use of light that works to generate meaning independently’ (28-29). Like her Leeds supervisors Professors Scott Palmer & Joslin McKinney do in their own projects, Graham moves beyond a rudimentary definition of scenography as mere stage design and instead understands it as an ‘active, consequential unfolding of elements within space, and, indeed, as a way of reading performance, scenography extends far beyond the narrow definition of decoration or set design’ (2018, pp. 36-38). This more holistic approach to the interweaving of visual elements also invites a consideration of the subtler and more proprioceptive impact of scenography and lighting in particular:

Understanding light as scenographic entails the impact of light on the entire performance event, requiring an assessment of not only the visual aspects of light but also the ways in which light impacts upon spatial perception and experience, and the ways in which light changes over time and affects our understanding of the passing of time in performance. (Graham 2018, p. 42)

Graham signposts the difference between scenography and ‘the scenographic, defining the former as materially-located while the latter ‘refers to the underlying principles of spatial and temporal inscription’ (43). Following this definition, I decided to begin phase two by thinking through The Ballad of Isosceles and its existing structure ‘scenographically’ in order to discover how light, space and rhythm could shift both the piece’s dramaturgical structure and my own performance delivery.

Light facilitates a ‘visceral shift from one type of viewing to another,’ as Graham reminds us (52). Indeed, it can even lend itself to constructing a more cinematic mode of spectatorship and certain theatre-maker directors welcome this interpellation between the theatrical form and the language of cinema; Robert Wilson, for example, uses the language of ‘zooming in’ when describing shifts in his compositions (Holmberg 1996, p. 25). Nick Moran (2017) suggests that spectators have become more comfortable with these ‘cinematic editing techniques’ onstage and ‘have learned to read these cues intuitively’ (2017, pp. 10-11 in Graham 103). In the third phase of research, we can use the connections between the live performance design’s cinematic aspects and its practical transposition (see Methodology and Theme) to our advantage; the choices we have made link well to a more cinematic understanding of wide shots, zooms and POVs.

My studio experimentation with Marty Langthorne led us to develop, through playful trial and error, a shared lighting language that was independent to but symbiotic with The Ballad of Isosceles’s thematic and textual parameters. We began to realize that while the piece occurs in three equal cycles, its scenography and lighting design require a more nuanced and cumulative arc. By discussing the piece’s thematic concerns of envy, the act of looking, distance and proximity, we realized that a certain amount of distance between microphone and audience (approximately 10m - see lighting plan) was necessary to establish boundaries between each of the three lighting ‘worlds’ we discovered. We decided that lighting both primary audience members (A and B) was necessary. Following Graham’s observation that ‘scenographic light is inherently dramaturgical, in that it is concerned with the impact of light on the structure of experience and the influence of light on the construction of the performance event,’ we chose to explore the ways in which separating the piece into three light worlds’ could drive both my own performance (by using the lights as co-performers) and the spectator’s understanding of the piece’s rhythm and narrative arc (55).

A key discovery for Langthorne and I was the power of stretching out lighting states (particularly the ‘second world’ of light discussed below) over time, slowing down both the fade up and the performer’s walk towards the light in order to effectively stretch time in a manner akin to that referenced by Appia (and Baugh) above. After WWII, new technology and non-proscenium-led venues permitted designers such as the Czech visionary Svoboda to ‘conceive of the space of production as a distinctive construct within the architectural theatre space: a construct of space-defining light born out of darkness, an abstract spatial composition shaped by light” (Baugh 134). These changes allowed mid-twentieth century practitioners (and beyond) to begin to realise the ways in which focussed beams and the “changing atmosphere of coloured light [both] drew attention to the fundamental, time-based nature of live performance…it is therefore the action of light within a scenography that may enable life and energy. Through its action, scenography becomes performance” (141, emphasis added). In what follows, I have attempted to elucidate the ways in which thinking through light alongside Langthorne has led to discoveries around the piece’s essential scenographic structure and its relationship with time.

The first world, the stage/singing area, became backlit by blue Fresnels (gel L363 – see lights 1-3 on the plan) in order to create an eerie and Lynchian atmosphere. The first lighting state after preset (LX 2) when the I enter is dominated by these blues in order to create silhouette and emphasise otherworldliness. When I begin to speak, a spotlight (light 4 on the plan) appears in addition to these blue Fresnels (LX4). The eerie back lighting maintains a connection to the world of silhouette and distance (creating shadows on the floor in front of the performer that make a triangle, which connects to the piece’s narrative and thematic drivers), while the silver-white spotlight, a Source 4 (L 201/202), signposts me (as Isosceles) and makes my initial monologue sharply visible. As this image (123834/130219) indicates, this lighting state creates an initial allusion to triangles by the shadows created in front of the spotlight’s pool. This is not meant to be a literal parallel with Isosceles’s ‘journey’ at this point; instead, it signals that the language of light will be running as a poetic companion to the text’s machinations. In this way, the light begins to operate rhythmically, echoing Baugh’s description of Josef Svoboda’s work “who attempted to create kinetic, mobile stage pictures which changed in tune with the changing rhythm of the drama’ (Baugh 125).

The second lighting world emerges at LX 4, when a Source 4 (also L201/202 – see light 7 on the plan) on a floor stand behind and in the middle of the two primary audience members fades up and seemingly draws the performer from her microphone position (the first world) down via a corridor of silver-white light (the second and liminal world between the two static states of microphone and audience). The central and repeated song in the piece, “Falling in Love Again” (sung by Marlene Dietrich in der Blaue Engel in 1930), contains the line ‘men flock around me like moths around a flame’ and this is very much the effect connoted by this lighting cue and I perform it as such, looking straight at the Source 4 and communicating a sense of being pulled towards a deadly and fascinating light. The floorlit position of this light also creates a stark contrast to the relatively conventional spotlit/backlit positions of the previous lighting states, lit from above. This works to create a different and more complicated sense of the performance’s relationship to space: all of a sudden the floor and the entire dress are lit, and the effect is both humanizing and uncanny.

Through experimentation and repetition, we decided that included in this lighting state, once the performer arrives at the spiked position (see Forward Mark on the lighting plan) will be the performer looking abruptly from the Source 4 to that cycle’s chosen audience member (A in the first cycle, B in the second and both in the third – see video moment x). While this corridor of light has brought the performer closer physically, the image up until this point has been effectively distanced by her stare at the light. By breaking this stare and looking at her next ‘victim’, the performer breaks the boundary set up by the lighting state and signals the proximity to come. Thinking more scenographically here permitted us to allow the materials (the floor light in particular, its position, and my relationship as a performer to the floor light in space over time) to structure the action dramaturgically.

The next lighting state (LX5) and world emerges only when the performer moves towards A or B and begins to speak. By hooking the cue onto my movement at this point, we effectively orient the piece’s scenography around my sense in any given performance of the piece’s rhythm – how long to stretch that look to the light and abrupt look to the audience. In this way, scenographic thinking shapes my performance delivery – I work with the floor light and my sense of this previous cue’s appropriate duration (LX4) in order to move distinctly and abruptly into the next cue and position. This type of thinking is rhythmic but also practical - it allows for the improvisatory responsiveness required in small-capacity pieces without compromising the piece’s aesthetic delivery. In this way, light is encouraging me to be tuned into the performance space in a more proprioceptively active way even as it potentially draws the spectator’s attention to their own senses through the shift of colour and light over time. Graham writes that ‘in determining an audience’s access to what may be seen, light is further affecting sensory, proprioceptive, and intellectual engagement with a performance’ and I would agree with her here (157); my experience of rehearsing and then delivering this performance in York is that light (as part of Graham’s ‘scenographic’ thinking) permits a more nuanced performance delivery by tuning the performer into the playing space as a rhythmic machine that operates across time and the venue’s given architecture. I’m also interested in how these choices shift audience experience; stenographer David Shearing suggests that heightened scenographic environments can approach lead to a form of ‘mindfulness encounter’ for the spectator, during which he or she becomes more aware of thoughts and sensations as they transpire (2018, p. 140). This not only suggests a denser affective atmosphere, but a more fertile ground for determining how material choices lead to a range of spectatorial responses, and Shearing suggests that this heightened state is extended when the spectator feels some aspect of control or choice over his/her experience (150). In *The Ballad of Isosceles*, participants choose whether to be primary or ‘shadow’ audience members and also make specific choices about where to look; for example, when I come very close to A’s physical person in the second cycle and perform as if I am about to spite in his/her face, A can choose to stare me down or look straight ahead, or even ‘opt out’ by actively recoiling. B, meanwhile, can choose to engage with my invitation of eye contact while I move close to A, or look elsewhere. My hope is that the scenographic framing of these choices (through light, haze and structured proximity) leads the spectator to have an affective ‘denser’ experience of whichever choice they make – indeed, to be aware of themselves *in the act of choosing*. Aronson, suggests that all postmodern design invites this type of meta-vision, within it; the spectator is ‘constantly made aware of the experience of viewing’ and with the present image’s ‘reverberations’ with the past (1991, p. 2). In structured discussions with collaborating practitioners and audience members in phase three of this project, I hope to determine the effect that these material choices have had on their perceptual experiences and whether the piece’s purposeful resonances (with film and with the pop cultural image of ‘the cabaret club’) have been successfully activated. Do the specific scenographic choices around light, space and varying levels of proximity lead to a more heightened level of awareness?

Whenever I do choose to move, LX5 shifts abruptly into a top/side lit warm state induced from lights 8-14 (a combination of Source 4s and Fresnels). This shift in particular characterises the kind of ‘perceptual interruption’ heralded by Aronson, shunting A and B from a more distanced form of encounter in the first and second lighting worlds to the warmer proximity of this third world at a snap.

This state lights A and B equally regardless of which audience member I’m focusing on, and casts the shadow audience in a dimmer but nevertheless warm light. We worked to ensure that the gels chosen for spotlighting A and B (lights 8&9 with R119/L506) and Source 4s making the my face visible to A and B (lights 12 & 13, also with R119/L506) create warm pools of light that frame A and B slightly apart from but connected to the shadow audience, and make the performer’s face visible and more human ‘up close’. The sense of quotidian proximity afforded by these lighting states matches and runs in parallel to the text’s requirements here. As you can see from the image in the focus notes labeled Channels 12&13, this lighting state also creates a triangle of shadows, repeating the piece’s motif of triangles. Meanwhile, the shadow audience’s Fresnels (lights 10&11, L506) both lack a key filter (R119) present on the other lights in the cue and are more diffuse (due to being Fresnels). They are thus made aware that their position is slightly set back from A, B and me as the performer. When I finish speaking at the end of each cycle, LX 6 (or its repeated equivalent – see plan) inverts the journey performed during LX4, and the corridor of light from light 7 on the floor stand fades up again, seemingly pushing me away and back to the stage once more, while LX7 occurs when I am ¾ way to the microphone and resumes the eerie world of blue-lit Fresnels from the beginning of the piece.

While LX4-6 are repeated as cues in the piece’s remaining two cycles, the lighting cues for the key song “Falling in Love Again” (LX8, LX14 and LX20) change and accumulate as the piece develops. LX8 sees light 5, see image125821/115811 (lit with L156 gel) come on at a side angle to my microphone position and in addition to the central blue Fresnels. The sidelight’s position is on the same side (stage right) as A, to whom I have just delivered text and attention downstage. I then effectively perform the entire song to this side light. The light becomes a co-performer here, and I perform to and with it, using dramatic hand gestures and an equivocal attitude of feeling pulled by and resentful of ‘the light’. A straightforward interpretation of this choice might be that the light ‘represents’ Zeus and that I am ‘playing’ Marlene in this moment, but I discovered that thinking logically and textually about this interweaving of light and performance wasn’t useful. Instead, I prefer to follow Appia’s idea that the lighting state (in combination with the live performance) generates its own set of layered meanings and that in fact these multiple meetings serve the piece’s thematic context more than a straightforward set of equivalences.

In ‘When We Talk of Horses: or, what do we see when we see a play?’, Dan Rebellato argues for the fundamentally metaphorical nature of theatrical representation: ‘in metaphor, we are invited to see (or think about) one thing in terms of another thing…metaphor does not prescribe in advance what sorts of connection must be made between two objects it compares’ (2009: 25). Lighting is a rich source of metaphor, and its inclusion in performances for small audiences is rare, due to the minuscule resources and venue support frequently allocated to such presumably nomadic and adaptable work. The 1-2-1’s (or 2-to-1, or performance for a relatively small audience on the festival circuit) What Langthorne and I have discovered through our studio experimentation, however, is that giving precise attention to a lighting plan’s execution can enrich a small-capacity performance beyond measure – particularly one that contains thematic concerns of distance and proximity. Light both structures experience dramaturgically (both the performer’s and the spectator’s) and encourages a more proprioceptive activation from all parties. As Graham reminds us, ‘the mediation of light extends far beyond its ability to control what is visible, but is a product of its manipulation of the performance environment through selection, transformation and organisation of space and time’ (113). Returning to Rebellato’s point, metaphor (as experienced in this case through a parallel lighting score of three ‘worlds) permits a doubled perception in which we are invited to think associatively without collapsing one thing literally into another. The triangles and shadows created by the spotlights pool are literally triangles, but they are also metaphors for Isosceles’s entanglement in a network of relations (and her mother’s before her, in the story). The green-blue sidelights that parallel A and B (I now sing to the sidelight on A’s side after directing my attention to A, to the sidelight on B’s side after B’s turn, and share my attention between both lights in the third cycle) become metaphors for Isosceles’s tidal relationship to her spectators who are kept in tow even as others are pulled in. ‘Men flock around me like moths around a flame’ she sings at the end of each cycle, and the lights become metaphors for the flame even as she herself is pulled to them – is she the moth, or the flame? The metaphoric quality of lighting design permits multiple associations without, as Rebellato writes, ‘prescribing’ which ones stick.

The next cycle is delivered completely to B, ignoring A, and as a result LX14 is sidelit from the other side (stage left) and performed accordingly. The biggest and most complicated lighting state and image, LX20 (image), is presented at the song’s third and final delivery, right before the piece finishes, once Isosceles has delivered her final monologue. The atmosphere of this lighting state (as described initially above) is meant to connote Isosceles being pulled from all directions. For this, we chose to have both sidelights up, all three blue backlit Fresnels up, and the silver-white spotlight from the piece’s start. As you can see from the 123809/123818, this lighting state creates a final and full image in which the triangles are visible once more and I perform as if I am being pulled between multiple angles, heights and yes – axes (remember the piece is about triangles). Light again drives performance mode. The starkness of the spotlight at this stage, which hasn’t been present since the piece’s start, emphasizes the focus on Isosceles’s emotional journey and accumulated ‘doom’, the sidelights creates axes of attention, and the blue backlit Fresnels connote the piece’s eerie quality. This accumulates to stage a final active image, broken only by the blackout.

When I brought the complete lighting design to SLAP in York, I had decided not to bring a technician/lighting operator due to the festival providing their own. We ran into some difficulties, however, when the lighting desk wouldn’t import the show file for the design, and when we did not have sufficient tech time to properly run through the rhythmic changes between lighting states (despite me providing all information well in advance). Unfortunately, this counteracted the ideal set out by Appia of ‘light as a genuine accompaniment, a continuously moving and transforming light “score”’ (142). While lighting desks do theoretically permit lighting designers and operators to record and play back set lighting states in order to ‘ “play” the entire lighting installation as a giant instrument’ as Baugh writes (ibid.), this is only possible when the venue grants the production sufficient tech time and working technologies. While the venue operator and I eventually found our own ‘rhythm’ with regards to mimicking the set lighting design, the obstacles led me to discover that rehearsing and bringing my own lighting technician with me on all shows in the future will be necessary in order for the design to be ‘played’ as the ‘giant instrument’ it has become (ibid). You will notice from the video that the lighting design in York does not entirely match that rehearsed and set out in London; the floor light in between A and B is rigged from above instead, for example, and the side profiles flanking the microphone are also higher than planned. This requires improvisation on my part but nevertheless, each light position still operated as a driving force for my performance delivery.

As we move forward into phase three of the research, I am interesting how I will transpose (see Methodology and Theme) this lighting design and mode of scenographic thinking into 360/VR video form, in collaboration with Langthorne (who is continuing through phase three) and adding filmmaker Adam York Gregory to the project.

In ‘Seeing Scenography: scopic regimes and the body of the spectator’, Joslin McKinney (2018) employs Martin Jay’s (2004) idea of the ‘scopic regime’ to discuss the ways in which certain dominant modes of seeing mirror larger cultural shifts throughout history – for example, the power dynamics reified within perspective illustrate the Renaissance-era shift to anthropocentrism (5). These scopic regimes bleed into the theatre through the conventions with which we approach spectatorial positioning and the movement of materials in the ‘playing space’ (indeed, the very notion of distanced viewing and boundaried space indicates a particular scopic regime at work). McKinney suggests that contemporary work operates within a new scopic regime focussed entirely on the spectator’s affective capacities: ‘the spectator’s body is significant as part of the way in which the visual might be understood; not simply as a representation of the world, but as a material and spatial environment within which awareness and understanding can be triggered’ (15-16). This new ‘embodied’ spectatorship or mode of viewing permits ‘material elements such as light, volumetric space, smell and sound [to] take on a particular significance – and McKinney acknowledges that some pieces might even include competing, and sometimes overlapping, scopic regimes’ (16, 19, 4). As the above account indicates, *Ballad of Isosceles* is now working explicitly with a distanced mode of viewing aided by light and spatial choices in ‘lighting world one’, then complicates this as a ‘scopic regime’ by collapsing into a liminal (lighting world two) and proximal (lighting world three) mode of viewing experience and back again. Although the spectators’ bodies remain still throughout the piece, by hope is that their participation is anything but stagnant; instead, I intend for these deliberate shifts in scope bring opportunity for reflection on the act of spectating. I hope these shifts or ‘perceptual interruptions’ invite the ‘embodied’ spectatorship heralded by McKinney, and my interest is now in how to transpose these shifts into a new medium in phase three.