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Lee Devin

Swarthmore College, ldevin1@SWARTHMORE.EDU

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Spectacle and Music

Lee Devin

Of the six qualities of Tragedy named by Aristotle, Spectacle and Music get the least attention. We have good reasons for this neglect. But there are reasons to revisit qualities that determine the basic nature of plays and to consider those that don't exist in scripts.

The qualities of appearing and sounding, essential to plays, require that plays exist only in performance or rehearsal. Plays must be made of something we can see and hear, or they aren't plays. Plays have these qualities of spectacle and music, not-plays do not. A thing without spectacle and music isn't a play.

Spectacle and music don't exist in scripts. But, what about "He crosses down left?" What about those speeches in Shakespeare where "The morn in russet mantle clad"? We read about those things, we don't see and hear them. For them to exist, some actor must move and speak. Words on a page are not actors moving and speaking. When we conflate these two very different things, words on a page and production for an audience, we invite deep confusion. By maintaining the distinction we move toward clearer understanding of each.

Spectacle: Everything you see when you experience a play: the backs of heads in front of you, the house décor, curtains, lighting instruments, everything. The most important thing you see is actors moving. And the most important movements actors make issue in noise.

Large and small movements of face and body are important, too. There are wonderful moments in plays where a simple gesture holds an entire world. When Biff and his father embrace near the end of *Death of a Salesman* the movement sums up the entire action without a sound. And we can make a nice play out of seated actors reading a script. Their expressivity resides in the movements of their faces and their voices as they make the noises indicated by the script.

Music: Everything you hear when you experience a play: the audience, the rattle of candy wrappers, and that siren in the street outside. The most important noise you hear at a play is actors speaking. The noise they make determines the movements they use to make it. If we want to hear the noise, "Brek kekkekkek, coax, coax," actors will have to make certain movements. We can say, then, that music is the form or organizing principle of that spectacle. If we want "To be, or not to be," we're going to need particular materials, certain movements that, properly organized, can result in those certain noises. In production we can get pretty picky about these arrangements. We can say that we want not only the noise "To be," but that we want a rising inflection on that noise, a low pitch, a certain speed, this or that rhythm, and so on and on.

Lee Devin is Professor Emeritus of Theatre at Swarthmore College. His book, *Artful Making: What Managers Need to Know about How Artists Work*, written in collaboration with Rob Austin, will appear in May from Prentice Hall/Financial Times.