

The Cine-Files asked *New York* magazine writer Jesse Green for a theatrical perspective on how the stage employs *mise-en-scène* to express the “cinematic.”

Putting Film in Its Place

Jesse Green

Though photography and the theater gave birth to film, they never married; it was a misalliance. Or, say, a May–December romance. Photography was still relatively young, whereas the theater had been around for thousands of years, even before the Greeks established some of its eternal conditions and primal stories. Among those primal stories was the one about Oedipus, and perhaps it’s only fitting that the bastard offspring with its newfangled technology almost immediately got into an Oedipal struggle with its elder parent. Was theater, in accordance with the ancient script, killed by the cinema?

Certainly it was robbed. The disputed patrimony, often as not, has been the concept of *mise-en-scène*, which though it arose from the stage (it means “putting on stage”) was claimed by some early theorists and subsequent academics as the key advancement and defining glory of film. Perhaps it is, but in using it as a club for beating up on poor old theater, such arguments broadened the concept to include just about anything film was imagined more capable of:

“. . . [T]he stage cannot show the layers upon layers of simultaneous consciousness. The stage cannot acquire the mobility of the subconscious, or put over as effectively the utter grotesqueness, so essential to dream states, which trick photography can capture on the screen.”¹

“There is much in [films] I shall never forget, and that much was supported and amplified in a way that no conceivable stage setting can compete with.”²

“Whereas theatrical space is so often dead space, filmic space can be dynamised as a plenitude, subject to the look of the

camera. . . .The camera constantly charts and redraws filmic space as fictive space and the actors submit themselves to the ceaseless recharging of on-screen space. By contrast mise-en-scène in the quasi-void of theatrical space can never transcend its basic materiality (i.e., it retains its theatrical framing, usually the proscenium arch).”³

It is perhaps excusable that partisans of the new form so eagerly acclaimed its particular abilities, but by now we ought to know that such acclaim need not be invidious. Even in the old days, theater had capabilities far beyond the arrangement of furniture and movement of bodies in the proscenium’s frame, chief among them the liveness that can make all other considerations paltry by comparison. For centuries, a well-spoken soliloquy was as effective as any close-up in directing the audience’s attention to the face of the actor delivering it. Likewise, writers of musical dramas have always understood that songs alter the apparent depth of field, blurring the background and foregrounding the singer while drawing the audience into her psychological space.

But in the years since the arrival of film — and partly in response to its widespread cultural victory — the theater has also vastly increased its repertoire of effects. Film critics I know who regularly make “yawn” faces when forced to talk about plays seem not to have seen one since *Tom Sawyer* in sixth grade. Advancements in lighting and scenic technology beginning in the 1970s have allowed stage directors and designers to achieve the equivalent not only of close-ups, but also of tracking shots, jump cuts, and even montage. That they do so in a medium where the audience is at least theoretically in charge of what it sees makes the achievement even more noteworthy. In fact, the only advancement in theatrical mise-en-scène that has not regularly succeeded in enhancing the audience’s experience has been the introduction of film (and especially video) into the stage picture. The results are usually laughable or nauseating or both.

Can we not conclude, then, that the two mediums do different things well? It’s a mistake to speak of the theater’s “failure” to achieve filmic mise-en-scène, not only because it sometimes can, but also because it shouldn’t need to. And it’s also a mistake for the theater, acting its part in the Oedipal drama, to overcompensate for the younger medium’s tricks and strengths. Plays should not have as their goal the impersonation of films. Never has this point been made as effectively as in Annie Baker’s superb recent drama *The Flick*, which takes place in a struggling cinema near Worcester, Mass. Baker obviously loves movies (and despairs over the loss of the 35mm format) but this, after all, is a play; she is out to show that the forms are not interchangeable and need to go their own ways.

The idea is brilliantly laid out in the play’s first moments. As members of the audience take their seats, they find themselves facing a movie theater onstage:

the rows of fraying velour seats, the exit in the rear, the projection booth above. It's like a standoff, or shootout. Eventually, though, a film begins, its beam aimed directly at the live audience, which is in effect the screen. It is overwhelming but also, as is only fitting, unintelligible.

Since 2008 **Jesse Green** has been a contributing editor at *New York* magazine, where he has written dozens of cultural features and profiles as well as a wide range of dramatic stories, including reports on the massacre in Mumbai, a suicide at Dalton, transgender children, and the first Ellis Island immigrant. Most recently he has served a three-month stint as the magazine's theater critic. For many years previously he wrote about theater and other cultural topics for the Arts & Leisure section of *The New York Times* while covering broader subjects for the *Times Magazine*. Green is also the author of the novel *O Beautiful* and *The Velveteen Father: An Unexpected Journey to Parenthood*, a memoir.

¹ Oswell Blakeston, "Freud on the Films," *Close Up* 5, no. 5 (Nov. 1929).

² Dorothy Richardson, "Continuous Performance – Pictures and Films," *Close Up* 4, no. 1 (Jan. 1929).

³ Barrett Hodsdon, "The mystique of mise-en-scène revisited," *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture* 5, no. 2 (1992).