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The Organization of a Stage Play

Overview:

A theater is a highly dynamic organization system dedicated to the support and development of a performance. At its simplest level, a theater might only need to be organized along simple role relations between actors and a script, which lays out detailed interaction notes known as dialogue and stage directions. Yet, the theater may also be organized through a dedicated hierarchy that has main organizing officials such as directors or producers. Resources can range from as small as just the cast of actors or as big as including these main organizing personnel and various technical departments. The scope of the system is usually highly dependent on the intensity afforded by the performing space, which sets the scale as well. The lifetime for a theatric endeavor usually spans from the conception of a performance idea, all the way through the dismantling of the set pieces on stage. During the life of the system, technical and human talent resources combine and coordinate to generate the external representation of a performance script and an artistic vision to an audience. In this case study, I will be laying out a broad conceptual map for the organization behind a scripted stage play.

What is being organized

A performance takes intense planning that requires the organization of several technical and talent resources that then must be coordinated in the pursuit of a seamless performing and viewing experience. In most cases, almost all resources that are to be organized are listed within the highly detailed interactions present in a script. A script functions as a dimensionally reduced set of spatiotemporal, technical, and socio-cognitive interactions. It serves as a tabula-not-so-rasa from where the producing individuals design their performance. Planning starts at this level, with a set of highly interpretable and mandatory clues as to what is needed within the system to put the total performance together. This may include notes on lighting, sound, or prop elements that the main organizers of the play must take careful note of and decide whether or not to include within the system. **Figure 1** outlines a fair-use script with example markings for some kinds of resource interaction clues that could be present in a script.

At the simplest level, all that needs to be organized are actors to fill character roles and perform the structured social and plot-based interactions that are laid out in the script. However, a theatric play usually relies on the development of a couple sensory and material fronts to help deliver a polished perceptual experience that aids in the believability of the performance. Lights, sound, costumes, set pieces, props, and
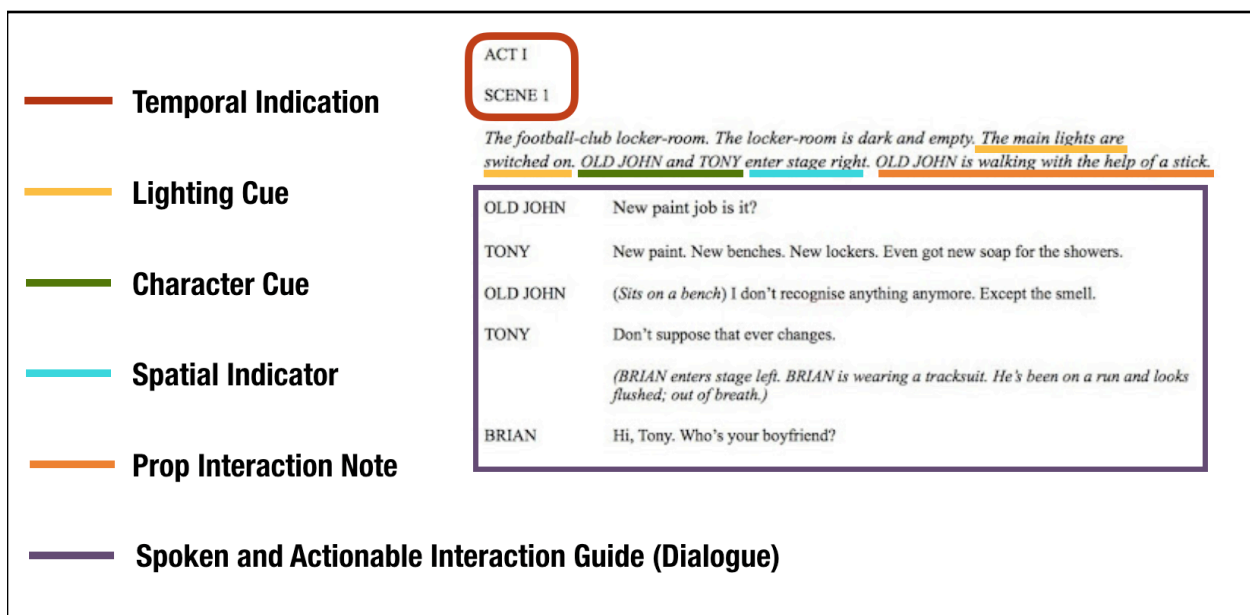
Legend:

— **Temporal Indication**

— **Lighting Cue**

— **Character Cue**

— **Spatial Indicator**

— **Prop Interaction Note**

— **Spoken and Actionable Interaction Guide (Dialogue)**

ACT I

SCENE 1

The football-club locker-room. The locker-room is dark and empty. The main lights are switched on. OLD JOHN and TONY enter stage right. OLD JOHN is walking with the help of a stick.

OLD JOHN	New paint job is it?
TONY	New paint. New benches. New lockers. Even got new soap for the showers.
OLD JOHN	*(Sits on a bench)* I don't recognise anything anymore. Except the smell.
TONY	Don't suppose that ever changes.
	(BRIAN enters stage left. BRIAN is wearing a tracksuit. He's been on a run and looks flushed; out of breath.)
BRIAN	Hi, Tony. Who's your boyfriend?

Figure 1: *A script acts as an intentional arrangement of dimensionally reduced resource interactions across several perceptual domain and an all important actionable social domain*

much more may need to be set, built, or found based on both explicit and implicit contextual clues present within the script. Personnel too, both acting talent or supporting backstage crew must be cast or employed to manage their specific domains. They are the human elements that work in a one-to-one mapping from script to resource.

Why is it being organized?

A theater is usually highly organized because there are simply too many dynamic resources and necessary interactions that must be rehearsed, maintained, or otherwise kept track of. The very essence of a stage play is that it is a scripted event. There may be room for improvisation or dynamic audience interaction with stage talent, but performance without a script is an entirely different domain called improv.

The most valuable interaction that the organizing system supports is the one between the performance and the audience. If the audience is not entertained, there will be less money in the pockets of the theater's benefactors, and the work of the cast and crew will either go unnoticed or fail to deliver on the director's or producing staff's vision. The performance itself needs a highly diligent organizing system to distribute work along highly demarcated lines (lighting, costuming, set design) so that the individual elements are highly coordinated with the actors on stage to render a whole greater than the sum of its parts. The main goal is thus to generate the most effective and thoughtful external representation of the script that is perceptually available, semantically sound, and artistically robust enough for the intended audience.

How is it organized, and by who?

There are different levels of intensity that guide the amount of organizing touch points and how associated theatric elements in those subdomains are arranged. **Figure 2** lays out the mandatory organizing paths (shown with solid lines) from script, to cast, to performance. At simpler levels, all that is necessitated are the simple actor-role relations that the script lays out. The script lays out a sort of criteria for the characters, whereby actors are cast with principles that are usually highly subjective interpretations of how closely their staged behavior coheres with the textual reference. From there, the full performance is 'blocked' whereby all actor movements and interactions laid out by the source material are planned out. Subsequently, the performance is put on to some sort of audience. This is the simplest path with the most bare-bones scope present in any sort of stage play organizing system. Scope largely depends on the scale of the space, as large theaters offer more affordances for interaction design between talent and technical resources. As the affordances for the physical space increase, optional elements (denoted in **Figure 2** by the dotted lines) may begin to enter the system. With a full suite of technical resources to manage on top of human resources, main organizing personnel such as Directors or Producers might be present to mediate the assignment of actors to roles and crew members to physical mediums.

Challengingly, a performance is only as good as how well your audience absorbs all relevant stimuli. Thus, activities in the technical domain deal largely with the need to deliver sensory complements on top of the dramatization of the text. Set
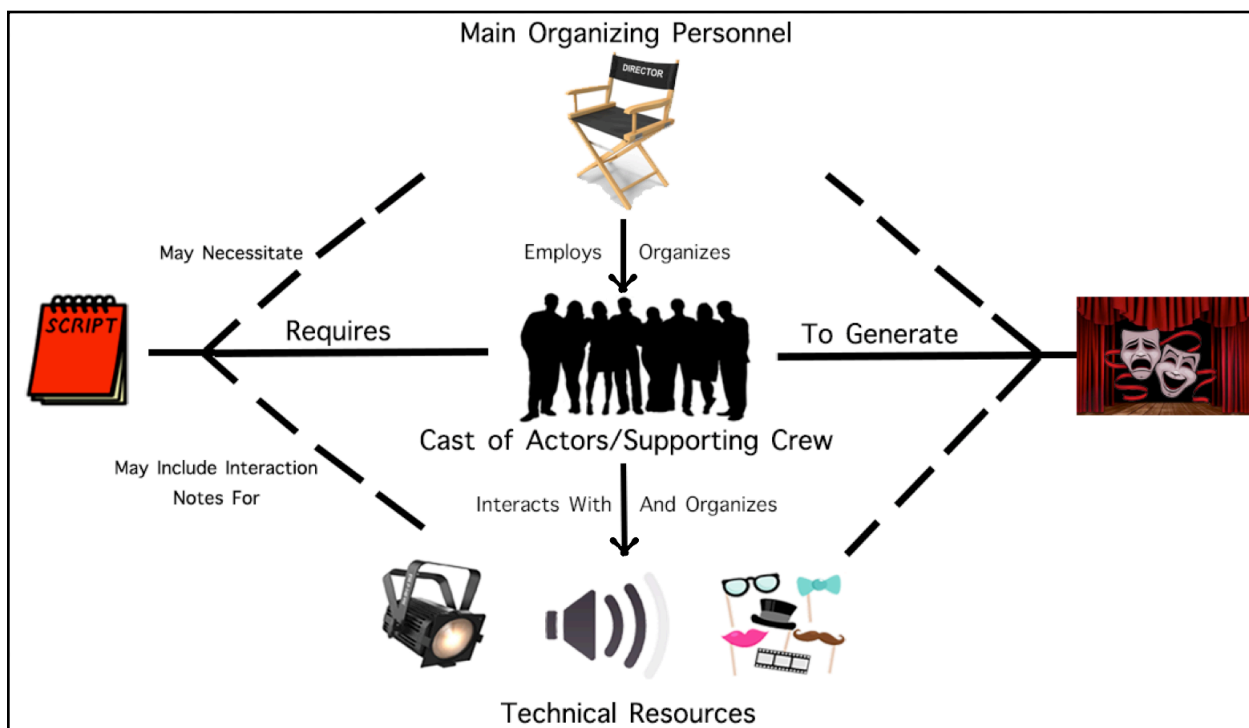

Figure 2: *The simplest path to performance only requires a cast of actors and a script. But as scope intensity increases, main organizing personnel may need to manage human resources who in turn manage and coordinate technical resources.*

designers will construct environments that grounds the acting in some imagined reality. Lighting contributes this as well, with the bonus of being able to highlight or occlude pertinent acting or technical resource interactions in the audience's perceptual stream. However, the base technical components of the performance (ie. sound, light, audience arrangement) are invariably constrained by the design of the physical theater space. Lighting systems can range from the sun in an outdoor space to a full set of powerful equipment afforded by the space. This sort of variance is present in most technical aspects of a performance— a Broadway theater might have the most cutting edge tech to assist the performance, but a basement of a pizzeria might just afford a small performing area and a greasy perfume. Thus, different agents in their various theater subdomains might have different approaches towards supporting the materialization of the text given numerous external dynamic factors.

As there are many moving parts, rehearsal acts as one of the most important maintenance activities in the whole organizing system. Both static and dynamic technical and human resources must interact with each other to deliver a polished perceptually and intelligently coherent product. To do so, acting resources constantly reinforce recall of the dialogue and blocking. Technical departments will practice set changes, backstage prop handling, and lighting and audio cues. There are usually full days set aside to practice full "show conditions" meaning running all interactive elements together without an audience to prep for a live audience. However, this may vary system to system. Maintaining these resources nonetheless requires repetition of interaction to ensure a proper execution of the source material.

When is it organized?

Stage plays go through three main phases: casting/stage planning, rehearsal, and performance. In the casting and stage planning phase, actors are selected and notes are made adjacent to the script regarding plans for technical resources in accordance with the affordances of the performing space. In most spheres, performances can be put through the rehearsal process from 2 weeks to as long as several months usually depending on the length of the performance, actor and crew availability, and several technical aspects that might need special attention. Once rehearsals conclude, a finished performance will run from anywhere from one night, to several months, to several years. How quickly acting and crew resources can be recycled in the case of the need for replacement and how well the system can maintain employment of said human resources factors into this heavily. Regardless, the availability of the performing space is the biggest determinant of the play's life cycle more often than not. At the conclusion of the theatric run, technical resources are dismantled or recycled for another performance and acting resources are dismissed.

Final Considerations

      It should be noted that this is a broad conceptual map of the general processes behind the organization of a scripted theatric piece. In practice, the script and the resulting performance will be highly variable and many unique theatric organizing systems follow principles of an ever-increasing level of intensity the more professional the endeavor becomes. This is due to both theater-specific rules or laws born from labor unions in both the acting and technical spheres. Ultimately, the basics of a stage play's organization scheme follow the general framework described here, culminating in a perceptually salient realization of an artistic vision and a script.