



## FEATURE

### The forgotten tools

Michael Kimm, [m.kimm.23@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:m.kimm.23@abdn.ac.uk)

University of Aberdeen, Scotland

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## The forgotten tools

Michael Kimm, [m.kimm.23@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:m.kimm.23@abdn.ac.uk)

University of Aberdeen, Scotland

### Abstract

Technical theatre, as a set of nuanced and specific storytelling tools and processes, is largely missing from the greater applied and educational theatre landscapes. This feature posits that this stems from an artistic hierarchy baked into the greater artform from its formal inception, perpetuated in its applied and educational spaces by a misunderstanding of the true nature of the backstage arts as processes for meaning making, not just as artistic products aimed at supporting theatrical narrative. Technical theatre also possesses conventions, and these should be formalized to allow for their demystification and use across fields.

**Keywords:** dramatic conventions, technical theatre, theatrical design, artistic hierarchy, artistic equity

### Introduction

In the summer of 2019, after an extended period of work in secondary schools as a theatre and technical theatre teacher, I returned to my alma mater of New York University to pursue a master's degree in educational theatre with a focus in colleges and communities. I had a professional lighting design and technical direction career of nearly two decades, fifteen years of teaching experience, and was excited to reengage the work with a different focus, utilizing the art I'd dedicated my life to as a conduit for change and community growth outside of both the playhouse and the schoolhouse. This invariably brought me back to the names and practices of titans in our field that had been left to rust in the back of my brain while I'd soldiered on in the trenches of my schools' theatre spaces: Brecht, Boal, Heathcote, O'Neill, Hornbrook, Bolton, and countless others swam back into my mind, re-emerging like old friends to whom I now felt a much deeper connection than I did leaving undergrad at 21 years old. As I engaged my studies both academic and practical over the next several summers, I couldn't help but notice that the dramatic work being showcased in the conventions of my professors of present and the masters of past didn't look much like the way I'd been engaging the craft in my adult life. How can we incorporate theatrical design in this greater applied space? Where is the mention of narrative through light and sound, mask and costume, space and time? Why is no one mentioning the tech? I asked more and more questions and got no good responses; no one seemed to have the answers. No one could explain why technical theatre seemed to have been left out of educational theatre.

Thus arrives this brief call to action I submit here. Conventions, whether formalized or not, sit as a cornerstone in many educational and applied theatre pedagogies, providing a solid foundation on which

a young practitioner may enter the craft a capable educational conduit for their chosen learning community. An issue that arises with this rapid expansion in use of conventions in dramatic and greater academic context is that, often, the greater foundational basis for the work gets simplified, stretched, misinterpreted, or misapplied, and in some cases, entire catalogues of hypothetical tools end up forgotten. Such is the case for the artistry of the technical theatre artist, whose work is also one of direct storytelling, and whose conventions, therefore, are also tools for meaning making. This omission denies an opportunity for the drama educator to engage their ensembles with the full spectrum of the grand synthesis art that is theatre. Thus, for a more complete methodology, artistically, educationally, and technically, we collectively as the practitioners and frontiersmen and women of the applied and educational theatre fields might well consider circling back to the backstage half of our foundational artform and mine these rich traditions of their conventions. This feature represents a hope that we as a community will do so.

## The forgotten tools

I have been throwing around the term “technical theatre”, and some will likely be confused as to what is meant. Far from what its etymology might suggest, acting built upon specific formalized technique, technical theatre is a catch-all term that generally refers to the non-performance elements of theatrical production, and historically is comprised of five distinct disciplines: set, light, sound, costume, and property.

### Set

The set department is responsible for the design, creation, and movement of stage scenery. It has traditionally been the technical discipline most concerned with *where* the drama is taking place, though that responsibility has fallen more and more to the lighting designer as time has progressed. As a fully tangible medium (as opposed to light or sound), the set is the best anchor a production has to define its *style* (naturalistic, minimalistic, etc.), and exists, structurally, to give the performance space *dimension*, so that performers, rather than moving on a grid, are given a third dimension to occupy, and may thus move through space (Di Benedetto, 2012; Campbell, 2004).

### Light

Unsurprisingly, a lighting department is responsible for lighting fixtures, the light they generate, and the execution of lighting cues. Internal electric lighting has been widely available since the 1920s, first utilized to full effect in the theatre in Broadway houses in New York City, where lighting was only utilized for *illumination*, making sure that the scene could be seen by the audience (Campbell, 2004). This is still light’s primary concern, but as technology has progressed light has more and more *atmospheric* (or motivational) concerns, which is light defining space and time, and *mood* (or emotional) concerns, which reflect a literal ambiance, a metaphorical theme, or an unseen character motivation or emotion (McCandless, 2020; Rosenthal, 1972; Campbell, 2004; Smith and Coleman, 2021). Projections, an even younger technology, were once the responsibility lighting department, but now they are often handled by their own specialists.

### Sound

More diverse than people think, a sound department is responsible for both the sound systems for a performance space and the specific sound and music required for production. While sound and music have been instrumental in theatrical and pre-theatrical performances for all of recorded history, the origin of modern sound design can be pinpointed to the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco in 1968. Sound, more than any other department, is concerned with *world building*, defining a semiotic setting for a world and how that world feels, and has the unique distinction across disciplines of not relying on an audience's sense of sight (Keenan, 2024; Brown, 2020; Collins 2020; Campbell, 2004). This means two seemingly contradictory things: it is the only technical theatre discipline that can exist entirely on its own (as in Radio Drama, for example), and it is the one most complimentary to the other disciplines.

### Costume

Also called wardrobe, the costume department is responsible for the design, fabrication, and maintenance of character clothing. More than any other technical discipline, costume is concerned with *character*, and acts as poetic visual representations of the complex people and relationships existing within the dramatic narrative (Pollatsek, 2017; Campbell, 2004; Kazuschyk, 2023). This character representation occupies three separate and necessary reflections; *literally*, who this character is outwardly and demographically, *narratively*, who this character is in the context of story structure, and *thematically*, what this character represents poetically (Campbell, 2004; Kazuschyk, 2023). Hair, makeup, and prosthetics long lived under the umbrella of the costume department, but now are often seen as their own disciplines and have their own experts respectively.

### Property

Usually shorted to props, the property department is responsible for usable objects on a stage, that is to mean, if it could be picked up or manipulated, it's a prop. Props, more than any other stage discipline, are semiotic and symbolic vehicles, inherently poetic (Sofer, 2003; Wade Jr., 2010; Campbell, 2004). Moreover, as each of the other disciplines also hold semiotic power, props have the most mobility as dynamic, evolving symbols, for while costumes and sets also move, they are both bound media, either to an actor or to the space itself. Props, on the other hand, hold both spatial and temporal mobility, as they are, by definition, objects that go on a journey, separate from the characters and (sometimes) even the narrative itself (Sofer, 2003, p.2). Props also hold a unifying positionality in the realm of technical theatre, as many of them exist as physical manifestations of the designs of the other disciplines and must deliver on the needs of costume (a parasol), lighting (a table lamp), sound (a radio), and set (a pair of Victorian curtains). Due to this charge, the design of props are often the conduits by which the designs of the other departments are aesthetically unified onstage.

It is also important to note, as the descriptions above hint, that none of the disciplines that together make up technical theatre are static, and a lot of grey area exists where multiple departments take on responsibility for singular technical aspects. Moreover, neither are any of these disciplines monolithic, whereby single individuals hold responsibility for all aspects within a department. Essentially, each

branch of technical theatre has three areas of responsibility: design, fabrication, and execution, and the artists that work in any of the departments described above are often specialists in one of these three areas, as operating in any of them requires a wide array of very different skills and knowledge sets. For example, a lighting designer is not responsible for the hanging and focusing of a lighting plot; that is the work of the master stage electrician and their team. Furthermore, while the designer will have a large say in the cues developed for a production, they will rarely be the one programming the specialized controller that operates the plot and executes said cues; this will be done by the lighting board operator, who then will frequently run the board during performance.

In brief, the tools and methods of the technical theatre artist are diverse, and the artistry they create is not just a supplement to the work of actors onstage. It is a wholly integrated set of highly specialized and nuanced disciplines that, together with those onstage, create a unified artistic experience which, when executed live to an audience, we ultimately call theatre. Drama, as the underlying process by which theatre can be created, should include this backstage artistry.

### **The gaps**

In 2022, *The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education* was published. Jonathan Neelands, in his foreword, declares the text “the most significant curation of the lived and living experience of drama education to date” (p.xx), which is a claim not made without merit. Nearly six hundred pages from seventy-five authors covers “the collective and diverse articulation of the field from theoretical, research and practical perspectives. There is a global reach, spanning generations, cultures, and contexts” (Neelands, 2022, p.xx). I do not have time or space here to discuss the amassed literature of the applied and educational theatre fields; I don’t even have the capacity to fully delve into the above text. But given my restrictions, I believe some examination of this ‘most significant curation’ might glean a theory on why technical and design artistry might be absent from the greater culture of Drama in Education. After the above claim, Neelands’ immediate mention of the ancient Greeks seems ironic in the current context, as it is with them and Aristotle’s *Poetics* that an artistic hierarchy was erected in the theatre practice that in no small way affects the current state of both our artistic and academic fields. This hierarchy is well known, as it aligns the six elements of tragedy into an order of import, squaring Plot and Character firmly on the top, supporting Theme and Diction (specific language of actors) in the middle, and disposing of Music and Spectacle unceremoniously on the bottom. For Aristotle, spectacle was the visual components of production, in short, what we now consider to be the technical arts, and in his writings we can clearly see his disdain for them, in what little he had to say. As he puts it, “The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and is connected least with the art of poetry.” Furthermore, “Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way” (Aristotle, 1996). This initial bias present at the birth of the western theatre artform stretches through time and space to the beginnings of Drama’s formalization in educational settings, and John O’Toole highlights this in his essay in the Routledge Companion as he highlights emergent educational purposes for drama in from the 1930s to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (2022). I will not take the time to list them all here, but I will note that while six of the eleven purposes mentioned can be accomplished through technical and

design artistry within drama and dramatic/theatrical processes, it is implied that these are being strongly considered as possible through an acting lens exclusively. “Drama teaches social skills”, “drama teaches empathy”, and “drama holding a multiple place in personal development” (O’Toole, 2022, p.69) are almost entirely associated with acting and dramatic play; with taking on a role.

This value placed on roleplay, on acting, in educational and applied theatre is not unfounded; the expansion and diversification of the field over the last several decades is a testament to its essential presence in our collective processes. Unfortunately, the power of performance, coupled with the root hierarchy in the founding artform, not only declares acting as needed and essential, but simultaneously casts other elements of the art and process as extraneous. This is well shown by Joe Winston in the Routledge Companion, as he discusses storytelling theatre and quotes its originator, Mike Alfreds: “Acting is the élan vital of theatre... its breath, its pulse, its source of energy ... there is nothing essential to a performance that actors cannot create by their own powers of suggestion” (Winston, 2022, p.175). Furthermore, Alfreds states, “costume, scenery, props and lighting rigs can all be dispensed with” because they are “unnecessary clutter” and not among the “purest and most essential energies” of the artform (Winston, 2022). This is not a unique opinion to storytelling theatre. Many researchers and practitioners, either subconsciously or overtly, believe the technical arts of the theatre can be ignored or dispensed with, and this is a fine explanation for the dearth of reference to technical theatre in the pages of this ‘most significant curation’. David Cameron and Michael Anderson have another theory, which they briefly put forth in their contribution to the Routledge Companion; they assert “there are no chapters in this volume, for instance, on drama and lighting because it has become so integrated it is ‘part of the furniture’” (2022, p.521). If this is true, that we don’t see technical theatre represented in our literature because we have all accepted it as essential to theatre and drama as a whole and therefore don’t separate onstage and backstage aspects of our craft, then the proof should be in the pudding. Much of the work in the educational and applied theatre fields is accomplished through a conventions approach; if the technical theatre really is ‘part of the furniture’, we should see these disciplines represented in the conventions themselves.

Dramatic conventions have existed in all forms of the art and have been formalized for use by non-theatre practitioners by many; Boal, Spolin, Heathcote, and others all have had their sets of formalized conventions for their own specific brand of applied theatre practice. The current standard for this formalization lies with the third edition of *Structuring Drama Work* and the one hundred conventions formalized and categorized by Jonothan Neelands and Tony Goode (2015). This set of conventions is broad, deep, and far-reaching, pulling from traditions from around the world and across time. By analysing which of these conventions are explicitly rooted in technical theatre artistry, or implicitly can be extended to include it, should give a good idea of just how integrated and essential the backstage arts are held by the greater field.

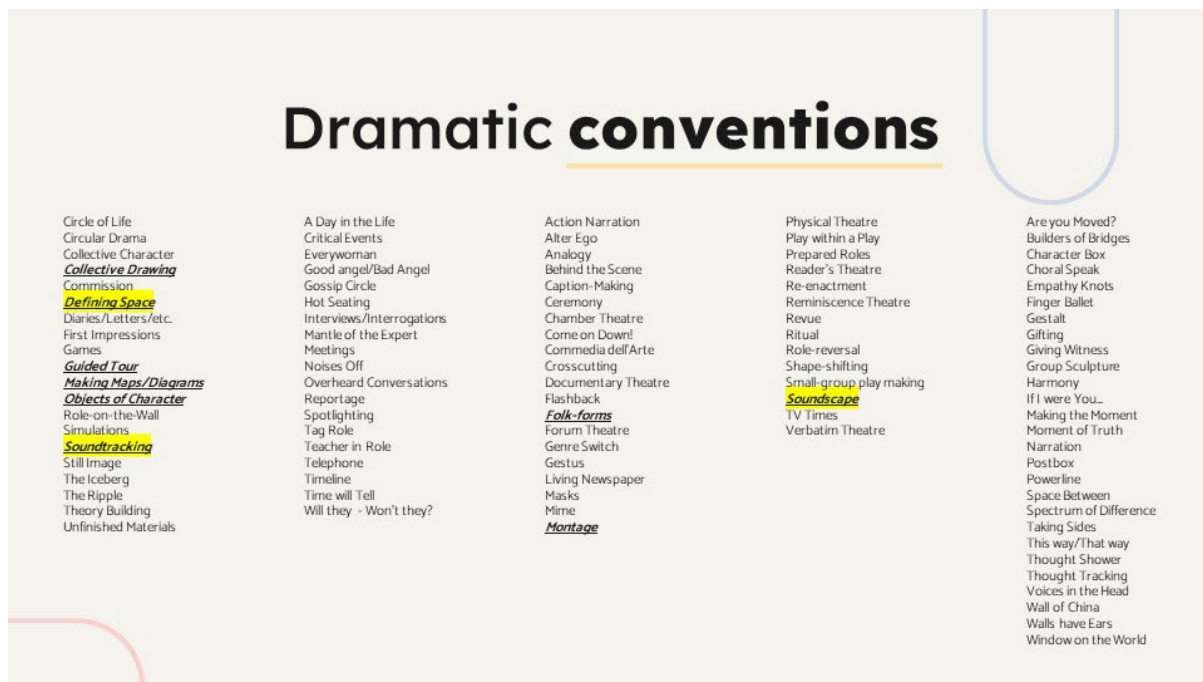


Figure 1: The 100 formalized dramatic conventions of *Structuring Drama Work, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed*

Of the one hundred conventions formalized (Figure 1), three are explicitly technical: Defining Space (set), Soundtracking, and Soundscape (sound). An additional six, Collective Drawing, Guided Tour, Making Maps/Diagrams, Objects of Character, Folk-forms, and Montage, have obvious technical utilization, but are not dependent on any specific backstage discipline. Others certainly could have technical theatre artistry brought to bear on the drama at hand, but the terminology of the conventions do not lend themselves to its inclusion, nor does it imply a mutualism between the onstage and backstage crafts inherent in the greater field. The conclusion then is, generously, 9% of formalized conventions are rooted in the artistry of technical theatre. It would be hard to move from that conclusion to the idea that the technical disciplines are missing from the literature because they have become so integrated into the artform as a whole.

This shortcoming, however, need not be difficult to correct. As with any process, technical theatre design, fabrication, and execution processes are also rooted in conventions. There is no reason that one hundred needs to be the number that we settle on; these technical conventions should be formalized and added to the pantheon.

### The value of design in process

With the great success of conventions approaches in the educational and applied theatre fields, one might ask why a set of technical or backstage conventions is necessary or preferable. After all, the utility of dramatic conventions in non-artistic spaces lies largely in their value for meaning making, which stems from their storytelling capabilities. Many would argue that technical theatre artistry exists primarily to support and supplement the actors in that storytelling, and therefore don't necessarily have a place in a process drama or community-driven devising project. Still others would point to the underlying technological needs of the backstage theatre artist as prohibitive to use in the educational and applied



theatre realm; must we not have a technical space to engage with the technical arts? Both points and their respective stumbling blocks, however, are built upon mischaracterizations of the field of technical theatre and misunderstandings of each technical discipline's role in the greater theatre artform. In addressing the former, technical theatre tools are not supplementary, and its artistry is not some secondary support to a greater story. Technical theatre is necessarily integrated into theatricality and theatrical storytelling, as acting alone does not make something theatrical, or by extension, dramatic. Inasmuch, technical theatre tools are storytelling tools on their own, independent of acting processes and conventions. Therefore, technical tools are also tools for meaning making. With regards to the latter, it contains a fallacy that has frustrated dramatic practitioners for the last hundred years at least: the need of a specific kind of space for the work to happen. We as a field (and frankly, as an artform) have long held to the opinion that any space can be a performance space. As technical execution is integral in separating theatrical performance from other types of performing art, by extension, any space can be a technical space. For any that might have a hard time considering this possibility, it might be valuable to remember that everything in any humanmade environment is designed, and is thereby a piece of technical art. No humanmade object or system has ever been created without thought being given to its function and aesthetics in its greater world. This means that, as design and execution are two of the three cornerstones of technical artistry, every space is *inherently* a technical one.

With minds unfettered by erroneously fabricated blockades, the value of technical convention in dramatic process is obvious. For starters, what craftsman wouldn't benefit from more tools in their toolbox? What painter wouldn't benefit from more colours on their paint palette? More options to move a process forward with contextual, narrative, poetic, and reflective actions can only be a benefit, simply for the purposes of storytelling. This is not the only advantage; dramatic storytelling and meaning making are built upon theatrical artistry and aesthetics, a large portion of which is shaped and supported, if not outright contributed, by the backstage arts. Neelands and Goode define conventions as "indicators of the way in which *time*, *space*, and *presence* can interact and be imaginatively shaped to create different kinds of meanings in the theatre" (italics original) (2015, p.3). The shaping of these three areas is precisely the purpose of the technical arts. Furthermore, from an inclusionary perspective, a more diverse set of pathways into the work ensures a greater number of people find a method for dramatic discovery and meaning making, and is an important step in legitimizing the backstage arts as on equal footing as their onstage brethren and tearing down our self-imposed theatrical hierarchy.

With all of this in mind, what follows is a potential example of what technical conventions might look like, formatted a la *Structuring Drama Work*, one stemming from the design side of technical theatre artistry, and one from the execution side.



## B. Narrative Action

### Scene Change

- Description** In any storytelling medium, it is inevitable that things get left out. These are events, revelations, transitions, and actions that happen off stage, if you will. In the theatre, however, we have a tool at our disposal that lets us explore these unseen and unwritten arcs and bring them to an audience: The Scene Change. Often thought of as a simple mechanical exercise between scripted scenes, this convention allows a group to fill in the gaps left unsaid by an author, or bring clarity in something left vague, and to do so, ultimately, as an abstract dance of actors, crew, and technical media.
- Cultural Connections** Changing life circumstances: jobs, schools, homes, relationships; video game transition screens; loading screens on websites or in apps; school passing time between classes.
- Learning Opportunities** Representing passage of time, travel between locations, changes in mindset; interpretation of unclear/unwritten text; consideration of narrative structure; evaluating what is/is not important to tell or show; adding clarity or insight into muddled moments or choices.

### Examples

- 1 A group is working on *Romeo and Juliet* and have arrived at the penultimate scene of the play: Romeo's discovery, via messenger, that Juliet is dead. Using movement and voiceover, Romeo's journey from Mantua to Verona is visualized both literally and abstractly, to unearth his transitions in location, mindset, and emotional state during this several hours journey.
- 2 A drama therapist is working with a young woman who has suffered from childhood trauma. The therapist has the woman timeline out what she sees as the "important" moments in her life, and then delves into the times between them that changed the woman from event to event. She chooses a piece of music for each transitional period, and thereby creates a soundtrack for her life.

## C. Poetic Action

### Three Lights

<b>Description</b>	Often considered the first lighting designer, Stanley McCandless, an American stage electrician, developed what is now referred to as The McCandless Method, a set of guidelines for lighting the stage for dramatic production. While some of his concepts are now seen as archaic, one that marches on is the idea that any acting space should be lit by multiple lighting fixtures, specifically, “at least three”. The angles, colours, and intensities of these lights can drastically change a scene or situation’s mood, atmosphere, place, and even the characters (and their traits) within it.
<b>Cultural Connections</b>	Spotlights; mood lighting; dance halls and clubs; lighting in public spaces; portrait photography; micro-LEDs.
<b>Learning Opportunities</b>	Abstraction; representation of ideas; multiple views of the same set of circumstances; defining space.

### Examples

- 1 In a drama exploring family relationships, a neutral tableau is created by members of the ensemble. Other members, with three (or more) handheld lighting units, create a series of different family dynamics by changing the locations, colours, and intensities of those three units.
- 2 A group working on the novel *The Great Gatsby* places objects together that represent Gatsby, Nick, Daisy, and other major characters. For each chapter, using LEDs, the group lights these objects to represent the relationships between the characters and elements of their story.
- 3 A group is devising their own story, and they are visualizing it through a toy theatre process. They light each moment for illumination, motivation, and mood, and film each scene.

So, let this be a first call to the designers, the craftspeople, and the crews, to the ones doing the work in the playhouse, the schoolhouse, the public house, and the statehouse. The tools of these artists are the tools of the theatre, not supplemental to those of their onstage brethren, but equal in partnership, fully valid and nuanced forms for storytelling and meaning making, by their very nature shaping space, time, and presence. This, according to *Structuring Drama Work*, is fundamentally what conventions are, and to not have these tools in our toolbox, these paints on our palettes, seems like we are missing large pieces of what we ascribe to when we practice conventions-based approaches in our work. We should be able to mine the technical disciplines of their methods for transforming reality, demystify them, and deliver them for use to all. This is a first expression of a hope that you might assist in that endeavour.

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