
Study of the Absolute meaning and Usage Meaning of the Stage Materials in a Stage Play

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Abstract

In the stage drama productions we observed, numerous stage materials were capable of conveying various ideas. However, these materials are recognized by the audience as elements of theatrical expression. The stage decorations, props, and background designs seen on stage can be understood as physical objects utilized in theatrical performances. Through these physical elements, the playwright or director attempts to socially articulate their creative expression. This practice dates back to early human civilization and was similarly evident in ritualistic performances. From the earliest theatrical instances to the present, physical objects have played a crucial role in stage productions. This research paper explores how these objects are used in contemporary stage drama. It also examines the meaning attributed to any object once it is incorporated into a theatrical performance. The study addresses these questions through participatory observation, which serve as the primary data sources for this research.

Keywords - Stage play, Stage materials, Absolute meaning, Usage Meaning

Findings and Discussion

The term "Stage Property" is also used to refer to props in theatrical contexts. The word "property" denotes an object or possession, and in the context of theater, it refers to the items used in a stage performance. The term "Stage Property" is commonly abbreviated as "Props". Objects visible on a stage during a performance, such as chairs, tables, and other stage elements, are considered props. Props are essential both for enhancing stage aesthetics and for facilitating the actors' performances. Therefore, the design and creation of props is regarded as a specialized task. (Mahendra, 1997, pp. 205–206). In general, if a material is written into the script, required for an action, or utilized by an actor, it is a prop. All other items on-set are considered part of the play, from the chairs and desks to the paintings and drapes.

The material objects present on stage can be categorized into two (02) distinct groups. The first category consists of the "stage backdrop," which remains on the stage throughout the performance and contributes to the overall functionality and expression of the play. The second category includes "hand props," which are actively manipulated by performers during the performance. Both of these categories collectively fall under the broader classification of "stage props." As a whole, material objects that contribute to enhancing the theatrical performance are considered stage props.

Sunanda Mahendra (*Sri Lankan Dramatist*) provides a concise definition of "stage backdrop" in the *Drama and Performing Arts Dictionary*, describing it as a set, stage backdrop scene, or theatrical background that serves both to decorate the stage and to enhance the creativity of performers. In many theatrical productions, stage backdrops remain fixed throughout the performance, which is why they are referred to as "The Fixed (Stable) Stage Scenery." This concept is also commonly abbreviated as "Stage Setting." (*Mahendra, Sunanda, 1997, p. 225*).

Although stage backdrops are often static, in some plays, they are adjusted to align with scene transitions. With the increasing complexity of technological applications in modern theater, certain backdrop designs are now created using advanced technical foundations. However, in Sri Lanka, the use of such technologically enhanced stage backdrops remains relatively rare.

The primary objective of stage backdrop design in a theatrical production is to shape the audience's visual perception of the performance. It enhances the audience's experience and engagement by providing a visually immersive environment. Additionally, the interpretation and expression of the overall production are effectively communicated through three-dimensional visual elements, making the message more powerful and impactful. Ranjith Dharmakeerthi presents a comprehensive perspective on stage backdrops, suggesting that they include removable but not permanently fixed elements on stage. He further emphasizes that actors closely interact with these elements during their performances. (*Dharmakeerthi, 2007, p. 132*).

In a theatrical performance, objects manipulated by actors to facilitate their actions are referred to as "Hand Props." These physical elements play a crucial role in helping actors portray their characters, represent narrative events, and express cultural identities.

For example, in the play *Maname*, the sword used by Prince Maname, and in Rajitha Dissanayake's *Sihina Horu Aran*, the gun, are both considered hand props as they are actively handled by the performers. Similarly, a teacup and saucer used by an actor in a scene where tea is being consumed also fall into this category.

Walter Marasinghe argues that the term "Ranga Bhanda" (Stage Props) is misleading and suggests that the term "Natyopakarana" (Theatrical Equipment)—which conveys the idea of handheld tools or accessories—is more appropriate in academic and theatrical discourse. (*Marasinghe, 2007, pp. 231–232*).

It is acknowledged that from time immemorial, apart from the performing arts, the indigenous people of the East and West used created visual aids as support for performances related to festivals, beliefs, and military occasions, and that by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the design of backdrops and stage props for stage drama and performing arts had developed as an independent subject. (Benthara, 19pp)

The backdrop and theatrical props used in a stage play as a subject unit are used quite philosophically in modern times. The playwright expects a lot from its action and use. Historically, a certain material was used for a representation to intensify the idea expressed through the representation. All the materials used in the creation of a play that imitates the joys and sorrows of the world have a responsibility for the design. They have a function.

Accordingly, the internal or architecturally visible material objects or tools used in a stage play should not be explained by the aesthetic approaches we see in ordinary life. Rather than just beauty and use, stage tools support the script by supporting human interactions and thematic expansion of the script.

When creators create backgrounds on stage, it should be known that the background also has the potential to completely destroy the creative process. Through various backgrounds and props, the audience becomes part of an imaginary chain of events in the play, and through the various material contributions we use, we understand the historical trajectory of the characters and their character traits as well as the causes of the events. That is why the stage on which stage tools are used is more important than a blank canvas. The appearance of a theatrical production is very important. In many cases, when a play begins, the first visual image seen as soon as the front curtain opens creates curiosity in the audience to stay with the creation from that moment on. The audience's mind stays with the play, seeking answers to that curiosity.

The most important part of any object used in a play, whether it is a prop or a backdrop, is to contribute to explaining and interpreting the action of the play.

Every physical object that we use every day existed in the beginning of the world without any absolute meaning, only scientific and physical meanings. After the meaningless materials were created to suit human needs and to be used according to the need, they began to have objective properties. Using the raw material "iron", man created the knife to cut and tear things. The object "knife" changed over time in size and shape as well as according to cultures, and its function was the same. We do not use the "knife" to make "tea". There is the object "spoon" for that. The "chair" was created for the need of the person to sit. Just as humans sitting on high places on rocks used a "chair" to make themselves more comfortable, a certain shape and height were created for it. Accordingly, the human body also began to take shape over time. The main point that is being tried to explain here is that as each object was created, a "meaning" was added to those objects after they were created. Material-based identities began to emerge not only for objects but also for personal actions and gestures in accordance with the objects. This idea can be better understood when compared with "Mime" Play.

In the representation of material values such as stage backdrops, costumes, props, and theatrical equipment, which are used as materials in a play, they are used to develop the prior technical knowledge of the body and Facial expressions necessary for the work of the play. That is, in the art of "physical representation", the human body is able to present a rich play by spontaneously directing the relationships it has historically established with the material. What happens there is not controlling the body. It is making the body function within the system of postures and actions that man has spontaneously developed, within the relationship he has established with a material over time. There is a system of postures and actions for using an object. There is a clarification of meaning according to a movement. In that way, there is a process in the art of mime that is carried out by understanding the material and directing thoughts about it under control. Accordingly, in the art of mime, the control of thought is the understanding and creative use of the production needs related to the material, the use value of

the product, the cultural behavior of man in relation to the produced object. Therefore, the mime artist works with understanding of the mind, the body, human products and production methods, as well as production relations.

In a miming play, in most cases no physical objects are used. The functioning of many objects is represented through physical gestures and facial expressions. What happens here is that the performer only depicts the process unique to a certain object through his or her performance. Just as the act of 'sitting' appears when 'the chair' is seen, the physical object 'the chair' is expressed in the representation of the act of 'sitting'. Accordingly, there is a connected idea between the action and the object. It is the objective meaning of a stage object. The object emerges from the action, and the action emerges from an object.



David Bowie in high heels – MIME Sit

American playwright Thornton Wilder's play "Our Town" makes good use of the above concept. In the script itself, he suggests a method of Mime theater. At the beginning of the play, two women from the Gibbs and Webb families come to the chairs and tables on either side of the stage and begin their morning work. At that time, the first thing they do is open the window, put the window cloth on both sides, and prepare the dishes and cups for breakfast. All these actions are performed without the objects corresponding to each action, but only by representing the poses related to those objects.



(Filmed at the historic Lyceum Theatre in New York, this is a filmed version of Gregory Mosher's 1988 Broadway production of Thornton Wilder's classic "Our Town.")

In the study of the theatrical equipment and settings used in contemporary drama productions, what is seen are physical objects that are used with Usage meaning. Here, "Usage meaning" is the use of an object in a way that is unique to another object, regardless of its objective value. To understand this very simply, it is possible to point out a simple material imitation exercise that is done in drama workshops. We suggest that a water bottle be given and that the water bottle be used in a different way than a "water bottle" in a representation similar to that model. In it, it can be seen that the people in it are using the water bottles we provide as a shovel, a piece of cake, a computer, a telephone, etc. This is a simple exercise that is often done in drama workshops for school students. Here, the artist uses his creative mind to represent an action that is not related to another material by attributing it to a given material.

A "glass cup" can be a "comb" in that process. A "bar of soap" can be a "steering wheel". Even though the representational object appears different to the audience, in creative communication the audience is led to believe it unconsciously. Simply put, in a children's play, small children participate in the animals, trees, and flowers. In that, the creative mind believes that it is not the children but a tree, flower, or lion that is inherent to those actions.

The stage play "11- Chairs", directed by Thusitha Laknath, Dhanushka Dias, Ayesha Weeratunga and Nirmala Bandara, which premiered at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts – Sri Lanka, in 2011, also received special attention in this research.

The "11 Chairs" stage play consists of 10 monologues, all of which are interwoven with music and choreography. This play, which has a flowing storyline, represents various characters we encounter in society. What is unique about it is that there is no specially designed backdrop on the stage and no special props are used. All of these are represented throughout the play by 11 plastic chairs. In one scene of this play, the monologue of Princess" Maname", who sells swords in a sword shop, is performed. She sells swords to customers who come to her shop, and throughout the play, she introduces each customer to the types of swords available in her shop. Here, the artist uses chairs as "swords". Based on various characters written throughout history (characters such as Maname, Robin, Gisbon), these plastic chairs are depicted on stage as the "swords" they used. At that time, the artist gives a usage meaning to the chairs. The audience

does not question the use of that material during the play and they agree to believe that the artist is using "swords".



In one scene, the plastic chairs that the audience believes to be "swords" are quickly transformed into "clothes". In the next scene, the visual ability of the artist and the directors are able to perfectly match the plastic chairs and the artist's behavior to create a story. The artist first takes the shirt he chooses and goes to the mirror to check whether it suits him. Here, the glass mirror becomes the audience. Another innovation here is the use of plastic chairs as pants. The artist performs by wearing a plastic chair just as we wear pants. He also wears it like a vest and performs. Then, he chooses a plastic chair and uses it as a Cap.



For this research, the play "*Raja Man Wahala*", directed by Chamika Hatalahawatte, was also studied. In the second act of the play "Raja Man Mahala", barrels on stage are used as a "royal seat", a bank of a tank, a door to the royal palace, a lake and a head-scratching pole. In the same act, a drumstick is used as a cup. In street drama, a mobile theatrical feature is also used to create a thousand things using a chair, a box, a piece of cloth and try to intensify the dramatic situation. In reality, these processes occur to establish the creative side of the play in the imagination of the audience.



Conclusion

A common idea that emerged from the above discussion is that it is impossible to come to a single identity in the material studies of the plays used on stage. Depending on the way the artists use the stage materials, there is the possibility of creatively using the absolute meaning present in an object in a practical sense. It is a use that can expand more imaginative spaces and it is clear that translating and using any object on stage for a practical meaning does not hinder the audience. It can be pointed out that if the audience comes to the theater to experience a new experience, the imaginative invitation that can be made through materials is more positive.

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