

Realistic Set Design Versus Minimalistic Set Design

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Abstract

How does a realistic set design affect a play versus a minimalistic set design? In this essay, the effects of a realistic set design will be supported with evidence from plays and then refuted with evidence from other plays. This essay will also support and refute with evidence from plays the effects of minimalistic set designs on plays. Five plays will be assessed on the impact that each style of set design has on each play. The plays to be assessed are *Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas, *Hello Dolly* by Jerry Herman and Michael Stewart, *Beauty and the Beast* made from Disney's movie *Beauty and the Beast*, *Catastrophe* by Samuel Beckett, and *Largo Desolato* by Vaclav Havel. The distinction between the effects of a realistic setting play and the effects of a minimalistic setting play will be revealed and proven in this paper.

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Theatre is a very diverse entertainment that uses many elements to develop the themes in a play. One major theatrical element is the set design. The purposeful use of a reduced set is known as a minimalistic set. Plays and musicals that have elaborate and realistic sets use the props and surrounding set to help develop the themes along with the character development. The question that many people ask themselves and the question that will be analyzed is, "How does a realistic set design affect a play versus a minimalistic set design?" This question comes to mind when one views a performance where there is an elaborate set which appears to be very realistic and then views a minimalistic set performance and notices completely different aspects of the plays and different means of obtaining character development. The purpose of this essay is to explain why there are these different theatrical effects. The props are key elements to the play, for they are what bring the audience into the events of the play, making the audience feel as though they are right there in the action. Plays and musicals that have few props and are minimalistic are known as plays with a minimalistic set design. Minimalistic set designs are used for the purpose of making the audience focus on what is being said by the characters rather than how the set looks. They are also used to distinctly develop the characters in the play, sometimes by using symbolism to aide the development. "Minimalism describes movements in various forms of art and design, especially visual art and music, where the work is stripped down to its most fundamental features" (TheFreeDictionary.com). Often times, plays that are meant to convey an important message or a serious message use minimalistic set designs. This is the director's way of drawing all attention on the actors and what they say or sing. Though both methods of set design are used in theatre, there are plays that require a realistic set

design to accurately portray the themes and morals while there are plays that only portray the elements that the playwright intended the play to have with a minimalistic set design. The question will be analyzed and the results explained by analyzing the effect each of the set designs has on five plays.

There are many benefits to using a realistic setting in a theatrical play. One example of a play that benefits from having a realistic setting is *Monte Cristo* (Cadytech.com), originally performed in 1885. The play is about a man who is falsely accused of treason and goes to jail on an island. Eighteen years later he escapes and finds a treasure he was told about. He returns to his homeland with a new name and extremely rich. He ends up getting revenge on those who prosecuted him while winning the heart of his former love. This play uses the setting around the audience to characterize the actors and develop their motives. The elaborate setting also aids the actors with "getting into character". This would be beneficial to the rehearsal process because the actor would be able to place his/her self in the setting a lot better, thus having a positive impact on his or her performance. Also, an elaborate setting that looks very realistic will catch the audience in a sense of awe, making them excited to find out what the next scene will look like and how the actors will use the set to their advantage. Another part of the set is how the lighting of the stage is set. With a realistic setting stage, lighting is also varied tremendously. The lighting in a scene that takes place in the evening can help set a calm and gentle mood, possibly a romantic mood for the audience. A major part of a *Monte Cristo* with a realistic setting is the costuming. The actors dress for the time period, which was the early 1800's, so that their acting and style of language reflect the time period. The costumes also help the audience envision the actors as their characters rather

than normal people acting. With the audience believing the actors really are the characters and with a very realistic setting, the play gains a certain emotional power whenever something drastic happens because everything seems so real.

Another play that benefits from a realistic setting is *Hello Dolly* (School play). *Hello Dolly* is a musical about a woman who is a matchmaker whose last matchmaking decision is for herself, although no one knows that. This play would benefit from a realistic setting in many ways. The first and most obvious way is that much of the dialogue is about the setting, for instance the general store, the hat shop, and the restaurant. The dialogue in the play, especially in those scenes, has a lot of actor interaction with the props and set like when Cornelius and Barnaby cause the store to smell with the cans of beans. Also, in the hat shop, Cornelius and Barnaby hide in the closet, under the table, and more to avoid Mr. Vandergalder. In addition to the set and props, the costumes have to be very realistic and carefully chosen. Set in the early 20th century, the costumes must be carefully researched to the time period, thus creating a more realistic image to the audience. In this way the set and props accent the dialogue. The costumes in the play tell a lot about the characters and character development through out the play. Dolly always had on dresses that made her stick out from the rest of the crowd, making men want her and women envy her. During the parade scene, costumes play another important role in how the audience views the production. The audience can enjoy the various costumes of the actors in the parade march, making feeling like they are back in the early 1900's on the streets of New York watching the parade pass.

Beauty and the Beast (Play at drama state competition) is another very familiar play that can only use a realistic stage design for production. Many props are essential to the play, such as the magic mirror and the rose. Leading from one scene to another, the set is used to make the audience feel warm, welcome, happy, scared, and sad. The bar where Gaston sings his song to rally the town helps develop his character as one who has a very high self esteem, one who hunts for the sheer pleasure of it, and one who has a huge ego. Belle's home helps develop her father's character. Her father is quickly made into a character who is an inventor, but a very clumsy inventor who the town laughs at for his awkward inventions. Also, more importantly, the castle where the beast lives has to look and even feel very dark and gloomy, yet it also has to have a kind of magical shine to it, which Belle finds so fascinating. There has to be a lot of special effects in the play for when the prince changes into the beast and then at the end when the beast changes back into the prince. Along with special effects, the costumes have to be very realistic in order to create a realistic looking beast and also the wolves for the attack scene. All these attributes make the audience feel more emotion for the play because they become entranced in the action along with the actors.

There are also many benefits to using a minimalistic set design in a play. One great example is Samuel Beckett's piece of work called *Catastrophe* (Beckettonfilm.com). In this play a theatre director and his assistant interview a protagonist for their piece of work. The play's only props are a black box for the protagonist to act out and perform whatever the theatre director tells him to do, an armchair for the theatre director, and a fat cigar. Other than those props and a few minor costumes to illustrate who the theatre director is, there are no other props or set pieces

used in the play. This very simple set design, known as a minimalistic set design, allows the audience to draw all their attention on the characters the actors are portraying. The audience will not focus on where the audition is taking place and why it would be taking place there and not somewhere else, but rather what the characters are saying, developing the characters and the morals and themes of the play. This type of stage design helps the audience feel in depth what the theme or moral is, rather than having to try to find it in a realistic setting play where the play could be watched solely for entertainment. This type of play can be used to portray a message rather than be used solely for entertainment. Often, this minimalistic play is considered part of theatre of the absurd. Minimalistic plays such as this are also affiliated with smaller casts than realistic plays.

Václav Havel's play, *Largo Desolato* (oobr.com), is another good example of a minimalistic play. Though it has quite a bit more set pieces and props, all which are essential to the play. It is fair to call this play minimalistic because all the set pieces and props are essential to the play; nothing else was added just for looks, all of the pieces were necessary to the development of the play. The play is about an intellectual named Leopold who wrote an essay expressing his views that were completely contrary to the views of those in power. While adding in some comedy, Leopold watches his door fearfully awaiting the thought police to enter and capture him. This piece clearly develops plots using as few props as possible, only the essential pieces on the stage. This piece is different from *Catastrophe* in the fact that in addition to having more props and set pieces, it has lighting for the different times of day along with character lighting. It also has costumes that aide in the development of the characters. The costumes, lighting, props, and carefully selected set pieces help the play's plot show through along with the

development of the characters. Though this on the outer rim of what a minimalistic play is classified as, it is still a completely minimalistic play due to its use of only what is necessary to the character development and plot of the play.

Realistic setting plays, while having many beneficial elements added to the play, also have their weaknesses when doing some plays. An example of a play that, though it could work with a realistic setting, would lose a lot of features is *Catastrophe* by Samuel Beckett. In the play, the audience would awe at the elaborate scenery rather than pay close attention to the actors. Through their speech and actions, the actors develop their characters and the play's plot line and theme. With a realistic setting, these features would, to most of the people in the audience, be lost in the action because they would be admiring the set and looking at what props they used. The audience members would try to place the audition in a real life scenario because of the realistic setting rather than admiring the play for its excellent character development and development of its theme and plot line.

Another play that, though it could also work with a realistic setting, would lose a lot of features is *Largo Desolato* by Václav Havel (oobr.com). The play takes place in one room and has some props that must be there in order for the characters and plot to be developed. The costumes also help tell a little about each of the characters in the play which is different from *Catastrophe* (Beckettonfilm.com) because, though the play is still minimalistic, it has more of a realistic setting. The play also has furniture placed throughout the room to go along with the script calls for, but nothing more than what is required. This play is best for a minimalistic setting because if it had a realistic setting, it would seem to be too busy for the audience and items such as carefully chosen costumes

would lose their effect of developing the characters, they would become plain, ordinary costumes for the realistic setting. Another reason this play is best for a minimalistic setting is that, like *Catastrophe*, most of the attention of the audience would be split between the setting and the characters, rather than fully focused on the characters in order to see the character development. These factors would make the play lose all its essential parts that it was originally written to have present in the final production. *Largo Desolato*'s plot line and careful character development are what makes this minimalistic piece so extraordinary. The use of only the bare essentials in the play is what classifies it as a minimalistic piece.

Although minimalistic set designs have their benefits, there are also many downfalls. One play whose message and effect on the audience would be affected by using a minimalistic set is *Monte Cristo* (cadytech.com). *Monte Cristo* was written for use with a realistic stage design, and many aspects of the play would become unapparent or missing completely. The overall time period the events took place in would be questioned while also losing track of the setting where the action is taking place. This would be done through the lack of adequate costumes and scenery. Costumes and scenery are two of the most important aspects in a realistic setting play. Without the costumes and distinct scene changes, the audience would not know the difference between the scenes and the different characters. Also, emotions would be lost due to the lack of realism. It is much easier for an actor to perform a very emotional scene while he or she is in full character rather than in scenery that is very minimalistic which shows that the scene is far from real. If *Monte Cristo* were to be performed with a minimalistic stage design, the actors would have to strain to make their character be understood by the

audience rather than just an actor saying his or her lines. The loss of character and character development in the play would hurt the play when Dante is imprisoned and when he and his love are reunited. The emotion of the scenes would not be apparent and the audience would most likely think the play was very dull. This would effect the theatre as a whole because money and regular audience attendees could possibly be lost if the play was not directed and set up as it was supposed to be set up and directed.

Hello Dolly (School play) would also suffer if it were produced with a minimalistic set design. This heavily set depended play would not make sense to the audience because of the way in which it was written. Although a scene or two could possibly slide without too much complaint, the play for the most part would be ruined. Dolly, for example, would hardly be able to become the character she was supposed to become, which would ruin the character development that is so vital to the play. Also, if no props were used, then the waiters would have to learn to pantomime in order to carry food that isn't really there on trays, which also may not be on the set, to the people in the restaurant. This would cause a lot of confusion among the audience, along with the actors trying to keep up on what is where. The only way around that confusion would be to not have waiters go to tables, but that would make the entire setting be questioned on whether or not it was a restaurant. In addition to all the confusion, the rehearsal process would be a lot longer due to the variety of skills that the director would need to look for and all of the people that would need to have those skills. In the parade, if all costumes were the same as each other's and as the actors' costumes who were watching the parade, the audience would once again become quickly confused as to what characters the actors were supposed to be in the scene. The use of a minimalistic set for this play would ruin

character development, cause a lot of confusion among the audience as well as the actors, and it would take longer to rehearse and audition due to the large variety of skills that would be required for the actors to have along with the large number of actors needing those skills.

Another play that would definitely not work with a minimalistic stage design would be *Beauty and the Beast* (Play at drama state competition). All the props necessary for the different characters to use makes it very difficult for a director to eliminate them and go with a minimalistic set, especially since the rose in the beast's castle is one of the key elements in the play. The play would be very confusing and hard to work if there were no props. Also, the play would lose a lot of the feeling it had with the stage's set creating the bar for Gaston, Belle's home, and the castle. Gaston's character would be a lot harder to create without his gun and the bar for the musical number. The scene where Belle is attacked by the wolves would seem very strange to the audience because the audience would not know where Belle was due to lack of scenery and most likely what was going on, especially since all of the actors who were supposed to be wolves would not appear to be wolves due to lack of realistic costuming. Even more importantly, the beast would not be a beast at all without a very realistic and elaborate costume; he would just be a human walking around in a funny way talking like a beast, making the other characters have to act like he was a beast. This would make some audience members who were not familiar with *Beauty and the Beast* not have any idea what that character was supposed to be in the play. This would pretty much null and void all the dialogue in the play, making it a pointless production if it were to be performed using a minimalistic set design.

Realistic and minimalistic set designs, as proven above, are generally one sided when it comes to selecting a set design for a play. Most of the time, the playwright decides what style set design he or she wants the play to be performed in, and usually that is the only set design that can work with the play. *Monte Cristo*, *Hello Dolly*, and *Beauty and the Beast* all require a realistic set design due to their styles of developing the characters and the plot lines. *Catastrophe* and *Largo Desolato* are two plays that can only properly develop their characters and themes using a minimalistic setting. Because minimalistic plays are so rare and usually aren't very popular, finding a minimalistic play is very difficult, which was a problem encountered when researching information for this analysis on the topic question. A realistic setting is used to bring the actor into the action while having some character development and a minimalistic setting is used to get across an important message or theme while using only essential pieces for the set. A minimalistic set design also uses the essential props, including clothing, to develop its characters along with carefully worded dialogue. Through this paper, the distinction between realistic and minimalistic set design has been revealed and it has been proven that most plays are written with a certain style of set design in mind.

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