

The Dramatic Imagination by Robert Edmond Jones was written in the 1930/40s as a sort of response to the theatre of the times. His words have had such an impact on design over the decades that designers and theatre artists still reflect on, discuss, and debate them to this day. The book, subtitled “Reflections and Speculations of the Art of Theatre” is separated into 8 parts, reviewing and discussing the major components of scenery, costuming, and lighting, as well as the past, present, and future of theatre as a whole. I admittedly, on the first reading of the book, had trouble relating it to work I’d seen or done. Mr. Jones, as it stands was a highly opinionated individual. There were several statements and opinions made that I did not necessarily agree with. There were also many statements that mirror my own philosophy. In order to make better sense of the information that I read and to give examples of my interpretation of his beliefs and opinions, I’ll discuss the design of *The Royale* by Marco Ramirez, directed by myself and produced at Middle Tennessee State University.

Mr. Jones describes theatre as a school and that the stage is an environment where the imagination should be stimulated. This means that theatre, as a process, should be continuously educational. One should constantly be learning when working in the theatre. As a future theatre educator, I agree with this whole-heartedly and I strove to create a rehearsal space that fostered the spirit of learning. From the actors to the creative team, I encouraged everyone to strive to know more than they knew when they started.

Generally speaking, I did not agree with the book when concerning around ninety percent of the opinions on acting. Mr. Jones claims that “normal people are not worth exhibiting.” I call foul on that one, perhaps in former times during the war people didn’t want to be concerned with images that were true. In that case, the sentiment is understandable as entertainment was designed to lift spirits and take us away from reality for a short time. Modern theatre, however, finds some of its greatest characters in being similar to ourselves. After all, art imitates life. *The Royale* followed a man who, though larger than life, was just a normal man who existed. The other characters were just as

rich and were quite average in comparison. Regardless, we as artists, not to mention the audience, were entranced and constantly engaged at the battles that they engaged in and fought on stage. I believe that in our time, while we still may enjoy seeing the characters who are just more than the average Joe or Jane, we equally enjoy seeing the average Joe or Jane. Why? Because it brings about an indescribable feeling of nostalgia. I did agree with the idea that an actor needs a certain wildness about them. It takes special stuff to dig deep within a character and pull out a real, raw performance. As Mr. Jones puts it in his book, an actor is a designer who creates the character who they're playing and they must do so artfully and multi-dimensionally.

The scenery of *The Royale* was pretty simple. There was a very tight color palette that was used and the stage was simple a boxing ring. Generally, most of the comments made concerning scenic design in the book, I agreed with. In summary, a successful design isn't fashionable; it is truthful. The design isn't about the designer (or even the director for that matter), but for the story that needs to be told (in other words, the design must serve the play). Stage designing also doesn't have to always be literal, rather it should be poetic when the story allows. I also believe that a design should be functional, not simply beautiful. The set for our show was fairly plain, but served the show in so many ways, allowing the actors to fulfill the energetic expectation created by the set design. Though not related to *The Royale*, I would like to point out that Mr. Jones seemed to have a personal vendetta against skeleton sets. On this, I would have to strongly disagree. He explicitly states that the set "creates and energetic expectation to be fulfilled by the actor." Under these terms, a skeleton set allows an actor to be their greatest selves pushing them to lead the audience in filling in the blanks. I say that if the story calls for it, the skeleton set should be used. The book also mentions that the actual thing is never the exciting thing, to which I disagree with to an extent. I believe that the real thing can be interesting if modified to suit the needs of the play. It was impractical to use an actual boxing ring for *The Royale*, so we modified it to suit our needs so as to tell the story better.

Costumes should be specific in character and approach. The costume should convey the desired prejudice to the audience before the actor even speaks. Once again, I agree with Mr. Jones' thoughts that the design should not exhibit the latest fashion trends, rather they should convey the story. Even when there are modern pieces where regular street clothes can be used, thought should be taken to carefully select those items and articles of clothing in order to create the character's prejudices, providing that energetic expectation to be fulfilled during the performance. The costumes for our show more or less told the story and conveyed the prejudices necessary to guide the audience's understanding of the characters and the events within the story. They may have been fashionable in that period, but the fashion would not have been distracting. Rather, it would have conveyed the prejudices of class, status, beliefs, vices, virtues, strengths, and weaknesses.

As far as lighting was concerned, I chose to heed the book very little. My reasoning: the advances in technology providing the opportunity to create new and amazing environments with light alone. Light is emotional and that must be carefully taken into consideration when designing. The same statements and arguments that can be made for scenery and costuming can also be made for lighting. The lighting used for *The Royale* conveyed emotions, focused our attention, and energized us as spectators and creators. Good lighting melds the costume and scenic designs into one glorious package. As technological advances continue to be made, one thing will remain standard for lighting: it can make or break a show.

As a director, my job is to lead the artistic vision of a show as well as to foster an environment of creativity. The key to design is curiosity, thus the director should guide that curious spirit never stifling the process. In addition to being an environment of learning, I strived to foster an air of "what if..." among members of the creative team, including stage managers. I did this so that everyone could feel as if they had a say in the creative process. My first duty, however, was always to the actors (as stated in the book) keeping them in mind for every design decision. It was also

imperative to identify problems before immediately seeking solutions (another thing that I agree with). This is important because skipping steps stifles creativity and can stunt the process.

Overall, I am sort of conflicted about how I feel about the book. Most of the time, I really wished Mr. Jones had kept his comments to himself. However, there were many ideas and opinions that I found I agreed with. I believe that theatre can be taught if one knows what it is and who they are teaching. Ultimately, fashions change and in several years, someone may look back on my personal philosophies and call them outdated. After all, theatre is a school and we are constantly learning. The book claims that we have lost “the dream” of theatre. It suggests that we have become so hurried that we have lost the art of the approach. In some ways, I do agree with this. Having been involved with community theatre over the past two years, I find it evident. We have become so concerned with constantly putting on shows that we forget what makes a show good: the artistry. If we want theatre to live on, we must recover the artistry. We must recover the dream. I hope I never lose it.