THE STAGE ARCH: A THEATRICAL DEVICE
A RE-EVALUATION OF THE ADVENT AND USE OF THE
SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURY PROSCENIUM ARCH

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by
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Renaissance Theory</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Teatro Olimpico</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Theatre at Sabbioneta</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Teatro Farnese</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Picture-Stage</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Picture-frame Theory</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Picture-frame as Setting</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Inner Frame</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial Framing Elements</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Baroque Frame</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Triumphal Arch Theory</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Royal Entry</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. EVALUATIONS</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Framing Concept</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Theatrical Approach</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Stage Arches</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Theatrical Masking Device</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Reconstruction of the stage of the Roman Theatre at Orange</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The Roman Theatre at Aspendus</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Front View of The Teatro Olimpico</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Design for a Theatre at Sabbioneta</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Proscenium of the Teatro Farnese</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Arcade Screen as symbol of castle-city</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>King on a throne in a curtained pavilion</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>City gate as Proscenium frame</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Two late Fourteenth Century miniatures</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Puppet Stage with castle proscenium</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Three Settings for the Andria of Terence</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Serlio's Tragic Scene</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Serlio's Comic Scene</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Design for L'Ortensio, Siena</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Theatre Design attributed to Francesco Salviati</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Theatrical Design by Giacomo Torelli</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Theatrical Design by Giacomo Torelli</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Stage Machinery of a theatre in Paris</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Theatre Plan by Inigo Jones</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>The Tragic Scene by Inigo Jones</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Frontispiece or Proscenium for Albions Triumph</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Proscenium design by F. da Bibiena</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Setting for La Contesa</td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Setting for L'Oronte</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. The Imperial Theatre, Vienna, 1690</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. The New Theatre at Amsterdam</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Setting at Drottningholm Sweden</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The interest of theatre historians and practitioners in the complexities of the stage arch\(^1\) from its inception in the Renaissance to its continuation in the most up to date theatres is well known and needs little elaboration here. Most of the studies concerned with the stage arch to any considerable extent are slanted toward the question of origin and development. Theatre historians and scholars have devoted much of their effort in the past five decades to the task of seeking parenthood for the modern stage arch.

Apparently starting with the popular premise that the modern stage arch is responsible for many of the ills of today's theatre, because it imposes on the relationship between actor and spectator, historians want to know where and why this imposition began. Coupled to

\(^1\)To avoid some of the confusion caused by the inconsistent terminology which makes picture-frame, peep-hole, and just plain proscenium, synonymous with the proscenium arch, the term stage arch is adopted for this thesis to mean the theatrical ar\(\text{c}\)h at the front of the stage. The other terms cited will occur only when clarity demands. Also the term prosceniums is substituted for the more correct proscenia, in the plural to avoid confusion with foreign equivalents.
this concept of the stage arch as the great barrier, is the notion that the tendency of the arch to frame and enclose the scene physically, results in this separation of actor from audience.

One naturally begins to wonder whether this separating device is a modern invention or something inherited from a previous theatre form. An examination of the main body of literature dealing with the stage arch indicates that there are three main theories as to the origin of the modern arch. Each of these theories offers a different source of the stage arch, although there is general agreement that it was established in the theatre in the early Renaissance.

Moreover, each of the three theories suggests that at the time of its inception the stage arch did not tend to separate the actor from the audience. Yet, these theories show agreement that the sixteenth and seventeenth century stage arch must be regarded as essentially a framing device. Indeed, the emphasis that scholars have placed on the stage arch as a framing device, from the time of its inception to the present day, is so strong that it is the central theme of this thesis. Yet there seems to be sufficient reason to suspect that the stage arch in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries need not be interpreted as a framing device.

Chapter Two of this thesis is devoted to a condensed presentation of the three main theories about the origin and development of the modern stage arch. Every effort is made by this writer to present these theories justly and in all fairness to those who advanced them. Those portions of the total theories which are not particularly germane to the central theme of this study have been omitted. However, the whole question of the sixteenth and seventeenth century stage arch is so firmly integrated with many other Renaissance staging practices it is sometimes difficult to avoid straying from the essential points. Care has been taken, however, to limit the scope of this study so that the entire gamut of Renaissance staging practices need not be considered germane to the central point.

In Chapter Three an examination and evaluation is made of the main themes advanced by the theorists in the preceding chapter. Here, the concept of the stage arch as a framing device is examined and evaluated in terms of accuracy and over-all philosophical implication; this is the central theme of this thesis.

Chapter Four is devoted to a brief summary and to this writer's conclusions. It seems proper to state here, that this thesis is in no way intended to be a definitive study. On the contrary, it is written with the hope that
it may open new avenues of thought so that the complexities of the stage arch can be examined and interpreted from more than one viewpoint.
CHAPTER II
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In general, there are three main views in regard to the origin of the proscenium arch. The first theory is that the modern proscenium is a direct descendant of the central archway of the Olympic Theatre, begun by Palladio in 1580, and completed by Scamozzi in 1584. This theory was advanced by Sheldon Cheney in 1923. The second important theory holds that the modern proscenium arch is derived from the conventions of Medieval paintings, tapestries, sculpture, and tableaux vivants. George Kernodle offered this theory in 1944. The most recent theory, offered by T. E. Lawrenson in 1957, holds that the origin of the proscenium is the triumphal arch.

As might be supposed, each of these theories has been repeated by other historians. In some cases the whole of the theory has been accepted, in others only parts of the theory has survived. It seems proper, here, to look at these three main theories separately.

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2Actually, Lawrenson's theory was suggested earlier by Magagnato, but was not presented formally as a theory. So far as I know, no one has repeated this theory, although many historians have suggested the importance of the triumphal arch in the development of the proscenium. See Magagnato, Teatri italiani del Cinquecento, Venice, 1954. p. 40.
Traditional Renaissance Theory

The traditional Renaissance theory, as advanced by Sheldon Cheney seems to follow a set pattern. The development of the theatre is seen as a continuum from the Greek theatre up to the present day. While the Medieval period is given proper attention in the development of the theatre, little is said about the proscenium. It is not until the Renaissance in Italy that the theory really takes form. The story of the proscenium as related by Cheney and those who have accepted his theory, may be told in four steps, (1) The Teatro Olimpico, (2) The Theatre at Sabbioneta, (3) The Teatro Farnese, and (4) The Picture-frame Stage.

The Teatro Olimpico

Sheldon Cheney describes the Olympic Theatre as a small Roman theatre:

The history of stage decoration up to the time of the Renaissance is, of course, the history of Greek theatre, with its gradually changing but always architectural background, and of the elaborately architectural Roman stage. . . . The Teatro Olimpico at Vicenza was practically a small Roman theatre roofed over; the same auditorium; the same half-orchestra; and- important here- the same ornamental architectural stage.\(^3\)

Cheney is quick to point out, however, that there is a difference between the Olympic theatre and the Roman theatres.

\(^3\)Sheldon Cheney, "The Story of the Stage," Theatre Arts, Vol. VII (January, 1923), pp. 50-57. These Roman theatres are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.
Fig. 1. Reconstruction of the stage of the Roman Theatre at Orange. Sketch under the direction of Camille Saint-Saens. From Cheney, Stage Decoration.
Fig. 2. The Roman Theatre at Aspendus. A reconstruction by Lanckoronski. From Cheney, *Stage Decoration*. 
By calling attention to the three stage doors which, as he explains, "did not merely serve for entrance and exit. Instead they opened on three perspectives, a feature borrowed from the prevailing fetes and masques of the day." These perspectives are clearly illustrated in Fig. 3. It is in regard to the central doorway of the Teatro Olimpico that Cheney derives this theory:

> In connection with my present thesis---theory perhaps, one should note that the central doorway of this Olympian stage has been appreciably widened and heightened, in order to give a better view of the perspective vista. This marks it, to my mind, as the first step toward our modern picture-frame stage.

Nicoll seems to hold with this theory as he writes in regard to the Teatro Olimpico:

> In newer designs of this type there was but a step before a proscenium arch was reached. In other words, the open setting as figured by Serlio might come to occupy the entire width of the stage, and the whole be placed within the framework (our proscenium arch) which was nothing but the attenuated façade of the original Olympic Theatre.

The newer designs to which Nicoll refers are, obviously, the theatre at Sabbioneta and the Teatro Farnese.

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4 Ibid.

5 It is interesting to compare Fig. 3 with Fig.'s 1 and 2.

6 Ibid.

Fig. 3. Front view of the Teatro Olimpico at Vincenza. (1580-1584) From Magagnato, Teatri Italiani del Cinquecento.
The Theatre at Sabbioneta

Little is known about this small theatre at Sabbioneta for there is little extant evidence. There is, however, the design of a theatre at Sabbioneta by Scamozzi dated 1588, just four years after the completion of the Olympic theatre. This design (Fig. 4) seems to indicate a proscenium at the back of what appears to be a deep platform stage. Macgowan suggests that, "the theatre in Sabbioneta may have influenced another architect, Giambastia Aleotti, when he designed the Teatro Farnese in Parma twenty miles away."^9

The Teatro Farnese

The climax of the traditional Renaissance theory of the origin of the modern proscenium arch is noted clearly in Cheney's remark on the Teatro Farnese:

Most authorities have with justice called the Teatro Farnese at Parma the first "modern" stage, because the proscenium arch is obviously there and an inner stage created that is designed for and needs picture scenery. But I wish to advance the theory that this stage grew out of the Olympian stage.

^8Magagnato believes that these are Serlian wings and not a proscenium arch. His idea is restated by Lawrenson. See Magagnato, Teatri italiani del Cinquecento, Venice, 1954. Also, Lawrenson, The French Stage in the Seventeenth Century, Manchester, 1957.

Cheney calls attention to the area around the proscenium of the Teatro Farnese. The ornate structure is identical to that of the Teatro Olimpico though less elaborate. See Fig. 5. Nicoll refers to the theatre at Parma as having the "earliest of the permanent proscenium arches." Macgowan, too, regards the Teatro Farnese as "the first modern theatre with proscenium arch and curtain." From the traditional Renaissance point-of-view the theatre at Parma marks a shifting point in the development of the theatre and of scenic design.

10Cheney, op. cit., p. 50. Edward Craig takes issue with this notion: "Through a succession of misstatements it is now considered an historical fact that the first proscenium arch was that of the Teatro Farnese. . . . Who started this story I do not know, but many celebrated historians have repeated it. In any case, Francesco Salviati (1510-1563) who designed some very beautiful scenes in his lifetime, designed them with quite unmistakable proscenium arches, and that was almost a hundred years before the Teatro Farnese." See Edward Craig, The Architectural Review, LXX, 1931, p. 10.

11Nicoll, op. cit., p. 90.

12Macgowan and Melnitz, op. cit., p. 41.
Fig. 4. Design for a theatre at Sabbioneta (1588) by Scamozzi. From Magagnato, *Teatri Italiani del Cinquecento*. 
Fig. 5. Proscenium of the Teatro Farnese at Parma (1618) by Aleotti. From Magagnato, Teatri Italiani del Cinquecento.
The Picture Stage

The theatres after the Teatro Farnese, says Cheney, slowly begin to lose some of the architectural ornateness of their predecessors and the emphasis shifts to the scenery within the frame.13 For the next three hundred years the artist is key man in the theatre as wings, borders, and painted perspective take over the scenic design of the stage. The origin and development pattern followed by Cheney, and those who have more or less repeated his theory, seems quite clear.14 The emphasis is on the regular theatre— the permanent architectural theatre. The early Renaissance court theatres, Royal Entries, and tableaux vivants, which Lawrenson coins as para-theatrical forms, are all considered as possible sources of influence on the proscenium by Cheney and his followers. They are, it seems, intentionally discarded on the basis that they are not part of the continuum of the regular theatre.

13Cheney, op. cit., p. 55.

14Helene Leclerc and Freedley and Reeves have also repeated Cheney's theory with some modifications. Leclerc states that the Porta Regia contains in embryo the modern proscenium arch, p. 90. Earlier in her work, however, we find "Dernier theatre romain... plutot que premier theatre moderne." (p. 84) See Leclerc, Les origines italiennes de l'architecture theatrale, Paris, 1946. Also, Freedley and Reeves, A History of the Theatre, New York, 1955, p. 65.
The Picture-Frame Theory

Oscar Fischell wants to know if there is any good reason why the history of the theatre should be studied apart from the history of art. His notion is "to conjure up dramatic events from the past through the medium of the works of art."¹⁵ Along somewhat the same lines, Kernodle, in an extensive study derives the theory that the proscenium arch has its origin in the conventions of medieval paintings, sculpture, and the tableaux vivants. Rejecting Cheney's theory as monstrous, Kernodle views the doorway of the Olympic theatre as a cousin to the modern proscenium, rather than the parent. "With the help of the visual arts," writes Kernodle, "we can now tell a more accurate story of the proscenium."¹⁶ His major thesis in regard to the proscenium is that complete and partial framing elements were used in paintings and other visual arts long before they were employed by designers for the stage. When perspective was brought into the theatre by the artist-designer, the artist also brought into the theatre the framing elements used in medieval


Fig. 6. Arcade screen as symbol of castle city and backing for throne. From Kernodle, *From Art to Theatre.*
paintings. The proscenium, from Kernodle's point-of-view, may be conceptualized as a **framing** device, in the tradition of medieval art—mostly paintings. From its application to perspective settings in the Renaissance, through a series of influences and developments, emerges the modern proscenium. It is convenient to organize the story of these influences and developments into the following categories: (1) The Picture-Frame as Setting, (2) The Inner Frame, (3) Partial Framing Elements, and (4) The Baroque and the Formal Frame. Each shall be considered separately.

### The Picture-frame as Setting

The complete frame was often used as a background in painting, and in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when the **tableaux vivants** were built, many of the traditional emblematic scenic devices were used as frames. The most important of these were the castle, the arcade, the pavillion and the triumphal arch. See Fig.'s 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. Each of these scenic devices were to influence the frames for perspective settings:

When complete prosceniums were built early in the sixteenth century for perspective settings, the prosceniums were not neutral but were treated as symbolic settings themselves and were decorated with ornaments, symbols, and allegorical characters of the **tableaux**.  

Fig. 7. The King on a throne in a curtained pavilion. From Kernodle, From Art to Theatre.
Fig. 8. City Gate as prosenium frame. From Kernodle, From Art to Theatre.
Fig. 9. Two late fourteenth century miniatures. Side towers and center arch made into compact facade framing an interior. From Kernodle, From Art to Theatre.
Fig. 10. Puppet Stage with castle proscenium. From Kernodle, From Art to Theatre.
The Inner Frame

Although many perspective scenes in the Renaissance led back to a painted arcade screen, the arcade of the Terence stages was still to be found. (See Fig. 11). This notion, of course, relates the framing of a scene to the Teatro Olympico, to the humanistic schools, and to the Jesuit Academies where the formal façade at the back shutter revealed little inner stages. The greatest significance of the inner stage is that it helped to set the pattern for the proscenium at the front of the stage. This, of course, was not accomplished so easily for there was still the complication of the forestage. "Until that forestage could be abolished, the proscenium itself had to be regarded as a scenic device."  

It was not until the late seventeenth century, and in some countries, another century and a half before

as a possible source of influence. In his Development of the Theatre, he follows Cheney's view; in a later work, however, he adds the street theatres as another source of the proscenium. See Nicoll, Stuart Masques and the Renaissance Stage, London, 1937, p. 42.

Lawrenson acknowledges the possibility of this relationship but notes that it is not susceptible to direct proof.

Kernodle, op. cit., p. 192.
Fig. 11. Three theatre settings for the Andria of Terence. From Nicoll, The Development of the Theatre.
this was accomplished. Although the complete frame was used as setting in the early sixteenth century, not all designers used the complete frame.

Partial Framing Elements

Some early Renaissance designers used only the partial framing elements. These partial elements consisted mainly of "the valance above, the parapet below, and the first side houses." These partial framing elements, Kernodle explains, were used in paintings long before perspective scenes were brought to the stage.

The most important of the partial framing elements was the first side house. Serlio, Kernodle points out, used only the partial framing elements, as his framing devices. These partial framing elements persisted even in the seventeenth century, along with the complete frame.

20Lawrenson questions the relation of the side house to the proscenium. "It does not even seem certain that there is always any connection between the long series of paired off objects farthest downstage in those theatres where the proscenium arch was not in use, and the arch itself." See Lawrenson, French Staging in the Seventeenth Century, Manchester, 1957, p. 137.

21Barnard Hewitt (ed.), The Renaissance Stage, Documents of Serlio, Sabbattini, and Furtenbach, (Florida: The University of Miami Press, 1958), p. 5. In this same work Kernodle points out that the partial framing elements were also used as masking devices for lights. Also, that while Serlio used the partial framing elements, Sabbattini "prefers the full formal proscenium."
The Baroque Frame

The Baroque productions used both the complete and partial frames. They begin to lose some of the ornateness and are made a permanent part of the theatre. While the complete frame becomes more neutral, the partial elements become flexible "tormentors" and "returns" that have come down to our day. Moreover, writes Kernodle:

While the late medieval and early Renaissance producer used his frame as a setting, gradually in the later sixteenth century and more definitely in the seventeenth century the producer separated the formal frame from the illusionistic picture within.

The shape of the proscenium was determined in the Gothic and early Renaissance period says Kernodle, "but the real concept of an illusionistic picture stage behind a formal frame was developed in the Baroque period.

This theory of the origin of the modern proscenium, and the sources that influenced its development, as advanced by Kernodle has met with the approval of many of the more recent scholars of the Renaissance theatre.

It has also led to the development of another theory

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22 Kernodle, op. cit., p. 199.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Kernodle's theory has been hailed as important by Magagnato and Lawrenson, on the basis that it disposes of Cheney's theory by proving that the proscenium could not have developed in any regular way from the central doorway.
about the origin of the modern proscenium, a theory which also seems to deal with the shape of the proscenium.

The Triumphal Arch Theory

The most recent theory to come to the fore about the origin of the modern proscenium comes from T. E. Lawrenson, who states his case very simply:

We are left with the simple conclusion that the origin of the prosce~5um arch is the arch- chiefly triumphal. 26

Lawrenson sees the emergence of the arch as a response to the need for framing and the concealment of change for the perspective scene and the theatre of pictorial illusion.


26 T. E. Lawrenson, The French Stage in the Seventeenth Century, A study in the Advent of the Italian Order (Manchester: The University of Manchester Press, 1957), p. 136. The importance of the triumphal arch as a source of influence in the development of the proscenium has not been neglected by other historians. To our knowledge, however, it has never been offered before as a formal theory of the origin of the proscenium. Although Lawrenson develops the story of the proscenium, along somewhat the same general lines as Kernodle, there are many points on which they are not in agreement. For these reasons, it is felt that the case for the triumphal arch as a possible source of origin for the modern proscenium, should be considered separately as a formal theory. Lawrenson's work, in general seems to suggest that this is his intention.
Lawrenson agrees with Kernodle that the arch, as a motif, existed in art long before the first proscenium arch was brought to the theatre, possibly he says, "from street theatres, though only because an increasing knowledge of the Roman theatre had put archways on the stage in imitation of the frons scaenae." Lawrenson, on the other hand, expresses caution in tracing influences and origins along the lines of the motifs in art:

If we exclude the use in art of motifs drawn directly from nature . . . we are left with only a limited gamut of largely geometrical forms, and these are bound to occur and recur wherever men invent or imitate. They will, of course, recur in painting, sculpture, engravings, architecture, and so on. So we must employ some circumspection in the following "influences" along gratuitous paths that these forms trace, of discerning parenthood amongst their often haphazard patterns.

Kernodle says, "we must not cry paternity where there is only cousinship." Lawrenson adds, "nor must we cry relationship at all where there is only coincidence."

In the case of the picture-frame, however, Lawrenson makes an exception:

When the weight of evidence for one particular motif in painting is great: the framing of a

27 Lawrenson, op. cit., p. 35.
28 Ibid., p. 48.
29 Kernodle, op. cit., p. 3.
30 Lawrenson, loc. cit.
picture for instance as an integral part of the total picture, we may assume as interrelation.31

The triumphal arch, as a motif, is considered to be the most important single source of the proscenium arch. Its use in the Royal Entry is the basis for Lawrenson's theory.32

The Royal Entry

Following Kernodle's notion that the culmination of the process which produced the formal frame is in the Baroque period, Lawrenson states his case for the triumphal arch in somewhat the following manner.

There is a strong resemblance between the tableaux vivants of the street theatres (about 1500) and the mystery stage. There is also a strong resemblance between the French Baroque stages in the 1660's and the street theatres of the same period. The connection

31Ibid. In general, Lawrenson views the proscenium arch as a picture-frame that defines the stage and separates it from the audience. This notion is qualified with the following remark. "This does not mean to say, as Kernodle's work, taken as a whole, would seem to suggest, that every framed picture from the Hellenistic era onwards is some sort of ancestor to the proscenium arch."

32Magagnato has suggested this same idea earlier in regard to the entrance of Henry II into Florence in 1548, which he states, "contains in embryo one of the characteristic structures of the modern stage: the framing of the stage with the arch." See Magagnato, Teatri italiani del Cinquecento, Venice, 1954, p. 40.
between the mystery stage and the Baroque is the Royal Entry. The triumphal arch, one of the main features of the Entry is thus brought into the Baroque as the proscenium arch. The triumphal arch was used in Entries long before the Renaissance, and by the middle of the sixteenth century it was a well established motif. With the arch already established as a motif with the entries into Paris in 1548, there is little left to invent. It only remains for perspective to become popular. The triumphal arch is "taken for granted". With the urbanization of the Renaissance the street and the stage are approaching synonymity.

From this point-of-view, Lawrenson sees the Royal Entry, with its triumphal arches, as a "nursery for the court theatre", and subsequently for the Baroque and the modern theatre.

Lawrenson cites the entry of Isabeau of Bavaria, Queen of France, wife of Charles VI, in 1389, as one of the earliest. This entry is described by Froissart and quoted by Godefroy. Several other early entries, taken from Godefroy, are cited by Lawrenson to support this view. Godefroy, Ceremonial Francois, Paris, 1649.

This, of course, refers only to France; perspective was already in popular use before 1548 in Italy, by Peruzzi and Serlio.

Lawrenson, op. cit., p. 48.
When the proscenium arch is finally established on the stage it becomes the great instrument of separation:

Paradoxically, the proscenium arch, coming into the theatre from a completely undifferentiated para-theatrical form, a form in which spectator and spectacle are integrated, the street entry, takes on the function, along with its curtain, of saying "thus far and no farther" to the spectator.

There are, of course, many developments and complications involved in the process, from the time the arch is used as a motif in the Entry to its subsequent use in the Baroque period.

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36Ibid., p. 136.
CHAPTER III

EVALUATIONS

The Framing Concept

The material presented in the preceding chapter represents a summary of the literature concerned with the sixteenth and seventeenth century stage arch. Although there is disagreement among historians as to the origin of the modern stage arch, there is, however, general agreement among them that the stage arch is essentially a framing device. Lawrenson and Kernodle, in particular, see the stage arch as a picture-frame for the picture-stage of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Their studies, taken in general, imply that the arch was moved to the front of the perspective scene to serve as a frame for the picture.37

This writer, as a student of the theatre, finds this concept dubious and incompatible with theatre tradition and principle. The concepts of picture-stage and picture-frame are concepts which seem to belong to the art of easel-painting, not to the art of the theatre. The theatres,

37Supra, p. 13, n. 31. Curiously enough neither Kernodle nor Lawrenson furnish one example of a decorated picture-frame to support this statement.
for the most part, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were theatres of action. Not only were there actors in front of the stage setting, but within the so-called picture, the rhythms and movements of flying machines, appearances, disappearances, ascents and descents form part of the spectacle for which these theatres are noted.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries stage scenery, for the most part, consisted of painted perspective settings, as opposed to the architectonic type of scenery used in most theatres before the Renaissance. The use of paint, however, was not restricted to the medieval easel-painter. Paint for scenic decoration dates all the way back to the Greek and Roman theatres, and its use on the stage can be explained in theatrical terms. A painted setting does not automatically make that setting a picture, as many historians seem to imply. Nor does the use of perspective scenery drive one to the same conclusion. Admittedly, perspective was worked out first on the flat canvas of the easel-painter, but its use on the stage requires a treatment different from that of the easel painter.

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The stage arch in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as part of the scenic decoration, is interpreted by stage arch origin theorists as a frame for the picture. This interpretation seems to stem from an untheatrical, philosophical approach to the theatre, which is characteristic of Kernodle's thesis. Lawrenson notes the pitfalls of such a philosophy in terms of tracing influences, but subconsciously seems to reflect the same idea in his concept of the stage arch as a picture-frame for the stage-picture.

It is generally understood and agreed upon by most theatre historians and practitioners, that in the modern theatre the stage arch tends to act as a frame which separates the audience from the actor and the scene. This tendency of the stage arch to frame results not only from its shape, but from the illusory nature of the modern drama. The idea of the audience viewing the scene as if through a doorway or window (the fourth wall notion) is well known and accepted by most modern theatre people. This type of framing is, of course, entirely consistent with theatre tradition. Kernodle himself points out that the idea of enclosing a small space to reveal little interior scenes was practiced in the Hellenistic theatre.

\[^{39}\text{Supra, p. 13, n. 29.}\]

\[^{40}\text{Kernodle, op. cit., p. 199}\]
Theatrical framing, however, is quite different from picture-framing in that it deals with the relationship, in time and space, of three dimensional actors to their spectators. This relationship varies and is contingent, quite naturally, on the physical structure of the theatre and on the style of the written script.

In the European masques and interludes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the written script was given a back seat in the vehicle of theatrical performance and the emphasis shifted to the spectacle of machine-made tricks and the wonder of magical scene transformations. In this type of theatre performance, where the stage arch is at the back of the performers (except those flying through the air on clouds) theatrical framing seems a dubious interpretation of the stage arch. Yet, historians, in their efforts to explain the appearance of the stage arch at the front of the scene in the Renaissance and seventeenth century, realizing the difference between the theatres of the Ducal courts and the modern theatre, turn to the only obvious resemblance—the tendency to frame. Aware at the same time that the stage arch does not frame the actor, it must frame, they conclude, the painted picture.

This concept of the stage arch as a picture-frame has been repeated over and over by theatre historians.
until it is a generally accepted fact. Indeed, Kernodle goes so far as to state that the stage arch is derived from the partial and complete framing elements in the tradition of the easel-painter. In any discussion of the stage arch, it is necessary to come to grips with Kernodle's thesis. To do this, it must be shown that the stage arch of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where it appears at the front of the rest of the stage decoration, is explainable in theatrical terms. This, of course, requires a theatrical point-of-view.

A theatrical point-of-view is that overall philosophical approach to the study of the theatre which interprets theatre activity in terms of theatre tradition, practice and principle. A theatrical point-of-view makes only one basic assumption; the theatre has certain traditions and principles which are peculiar to this art and no other. It should be clear after centuries of theatrical activity, that while the theatre incorporates the principles and practices of the other arts, these are valueless to the theatre experience until they are translated for use on the stage in terms of theatrical principles and practices.

The theatre is traditionally a mobile art form which requires principles for relating live actors to their spectators. The principles involved in the attempt
to evoke responses to inanimate objects can never be the same as those used to evoke responses to animated objects. In the whole of theatre history and tradition there does not seem to be evidence of any one theatre form, anywhere, where the total theatrical experience is devoid of movement by three dimensional figures.

There are instances, however, where the resemblances between the practices of one visual art and another are so strong that it becomes difficult to distinguish one from the other. This difficulty is exemplified in the use of the stage arch—especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The use of perspective in painting, the resemblance between the shape of the stage arch and the shape of the picture-frame, and the fact that Renaissance theatre architects were also easel-painters, make it difficult to separate theatrical tradition and practice from those of the other visual arts. The theatrical traditions of decorated stage arches, and the practice of concealing stage machines, however, are there and distinct.

From a theatrical approach to the use of the Renaissance stage arch, it can be shown that the arch is a traditional theatrical decorative device, and that it emerged at the front of the perspective sets of the
Renaissance theatres in response to the need for masking stage machinery— not to frame the picture-stage.\textsuperscript{41}

A Theatrical Approach

The decorative aspect and the masking aspect of the stage arch are simultaneous in its use at the front of the perspective settings of the Renaissance court theatres. It is more convenient, however, to examine these two aspects of the arch separately. In establishing the tradition of the decorated stage arch, a complete and detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this thesis. Yet, sufficient evidence is offered to illustrate the consistency in the use of the decorative stage arch from the ancient theatres through the theatres of the seventeenth century. In the second part of this theatrical approach, the need for masking stage machinery is established. A brief summary following this will tie the two discussions together.

Traditional Stage Arches

The decorated stage arch is not an innovation of the Renaissance. In Chapter Two, the reconstructions of the Roman theatres at Aspendus and at Orange indicate the abundant use of the decorated type of arch. In Fig.'s 1

\textsuperscript{41}From this point on, the term stage machinery is meant to include lighting equipment of all kinds.
and 2 are seen the traditional style in which these arches are decorated. Attention is called to the niches with standing statues in them, the pilasters, the cornices of the arches upon which statues are standing, and the general design which suggests that each section is a separate unit, yet still part of the whole architectural facade. It is important to state here, that these are not merely decorations, but constitute for these theatres the scenery of the play—symbolic scenery, of course, but scenery nevertheless.

These same decorative features are to be found in the stage arches of the Renaissance (when they are in use) and throughout the seventeenth century. Before illustrating this traditional use of the decorative stage arch, it is important to know how the tradition was carried from the ancient theatre to the Renaissance theatre. The answer to this question is the central theme of Kernodle's thesis in *From Art to Theatre*. He maintains that it is the conventional practices of the medieval easel-painter that brought the stage arch to the perspective stage. The influence of the easel-painter in this regard cannot be ignored; however, it is significant to note that the conventions which he helped to bring to the perspective stage were theatrical conventions which he copied from the conventions of the Greek and Roman theatres.
Kernodle notes that "in the fifteenth century, Italian painters began early painting formal Renaissance arches and then triumphal arches, either behind the characters or near the front, to frame the scene." He also notes that they copied these formal arches from what Hellenistic painters copied from the Greek theatre. The use of the traditionally decorated stage arch, furthermore, was kept alive between the time of the ancients and the Renaissance, by its use in the Royal Entry. The triumphal arch, as Lawrenson notes, was popular, and taken for granted by the beginning of the sixteenth century. Moreover, there is the influence of Vitruvius to be considered. Theatre architects interpreting Vitruvius in the medieval period for the plays of Terence and Plautus, built what they thought was a frons scænæ (See Fig. 11). In these designs the attempt at reconstruction of the Roman theatre facade is clear. Note the symbolic archways of the Greek and Roman theatres, and even the attempt at niches with standing statues.

42 Kernodle, op. cit., p. 196. This may very well be the case but Kernodle does not furnish any examples of these arches in paintings.

43 Kernodle, op. cit., p. 3.
44 Supra, p. 14, n. 34.
45 Kernodle's theory of the arcade screen sidetracking
Thus the pattern is clear, the theatrical tradition of using decorated stage arches as part of the total scenic effect in the ancient Greek and Roman theatres, was kept alive by the works of Vitruvius, the use of the decorated stage arch in the Royal Entry, and the copying of these traditions by Medieval and Renaissance easel-painters. Which of these was the greatest influence in bringing the decorated arch into the perspective settings of the Renaissance, is not susceptible to direct proof.

It is known, however, that Serlio interpreted the works of Vitruvius, and in his Tragic Scene (Fig. 12) there are traditionally decorated arches incorporated into the scene. The first side house on the left of this design, for example, is an arch facing across the stage. Notice the statues in the niches at the side. At the rear of the scene is what appears to be a triumphal arch. It is interesting to compare this arch with the top center section of the facade of the Roman theatre at Orange.

Vitruvius, and having its origin in medieval art lacks force. Lawrenson, op. cit., pp. 50-51, gives a good account of the arcade screen.

There are also arches in Serlio's Comic Scene (Fig. 13) but they are not the decorated type. This helps to illustrate that not all arches are necessarily the same as the type used for decoration in the style of the classic theatre. The weight of evidence is strong for Lawrenson's theory of the importance of the Triumphal Arch in the emergence of the stage arch at the front of the scene.
Fig. 12. Serlio's Tragic Scene (1545). From Cheney, Stage Decoration.
Fig. 13. Serlio's Comic Scene (1545). From Cheney, *Stage Decoration*. 
(Fig. 1). The niches, statues, pilasters and cornices of this ancient theatre are all present in the arch at the rear of the Serlian design. It is reasonable to suppose that the influence of Vitruvius in bringing the decorated arch to the perspective scene is great.

The decorative stage arches in the Serlian type setting were scattered throughout the scene. Later, however, when the stage arch was moved to the front of the scene it still retained the same type of traditional decoration. The first graphic evidence of a stage arch at the front of the scene is seen in the design by Bartolomeo Neroni (Fig. 14) for L'Ortensio, at Siena, in 1560. Here the traditional niches, columns, and statues are quite visible. Again, in the Salviati design (Fig. 15), are seen the traditional pilasters and statues.47 One needs only to turn back to Fig.'s 1 and 2 to see the origin of these decorated stage arches.

From the ancient Greek and Roman theatres to the Italian court theatres of the Renaissance, the tradition of decorated stage arches is carried on. For Cheney, the crowning glory of this tradition is the Teatro Olimpico

47 Magagnato dates the Neroni design for L'Ortensio at 1560 and he is probably right. He questions, however, the attribution of the theatre design in Fig. 15 to Salviati, but suggests it was done by someone in the same artistic circle and dates it about 1565-1570.
Fig. 14. Design for L'Ortensio, Siena (1560) by Bartolomeo Neroni (Riccio). From Nicoll, The Development of the Theatre.
Fig. 15. Theatre design attributed to Francesco Salviati (1565-1570). From Magagnato, Teatri Italiani del Cinquecento.
(Fig. 3) which is an actual attempt to reconstitute the whole theatre style of the Romans.\(^4\)\(^8\) The tradition of stage arches decorated in the classic manner does not end, however, in the sixteenth century.

Early in the seventeenth century, while the Italian court theatres were still using perspective scenery, some with decorated arches, and some without them in the Serlian tradition, another attempt was made to combine the theatres of the Romans and the perspective of the court theatres. This is exemplified in the **Teatro Farnese** at Parma, 1618 (Fig. 5). Here too, of course, are the niches, statues, and pilasters of the Roman theatres. Cheney sees this theatre as the last attempt at permanent architectural construction of a theatre for three hundred years. The emphasis, he notes, shifts to the scenery behind the arch.\(^4\)\(^9\) For the most part, this is so; he fails to notice, however, that the stage arch continued to carry the tradition of the ancient theatres in its decor.

Outside Italy in the seventeenth century, the impact of the Italian court theatre perspectives was felt and the practices were imitated. The use of the decorated stage arch was not neglected in this transmission of

\(^{48}\)Comparisons between the Olympic theatre (Fig. 3) and the Roman theatres (Fig.'s 1-2) are noted in Chapter II.

\(^{49}\)Supra, p. 5, n. 13.
Italian staging practices. In England, for example, Inigo Jones, who early in the seventeenth century paid a visit to Italy, introduced to England, the decorated stage arch as part of the scenery. Obviously enamoured of the Italian court masque and influenced by the work of Palladio, Jones drew this plan (Fig. 19) for a theatre. The resemblance to the central doorway of the Olympic theatre is worth noting. Here again, are the pilasters, niches and statues of the Roman theatre.

After experimenting with the Palladian scheme, Jones apparently turned all his attention to the perspective and practice of the court masque. Here the stage arch is decorated as part of the masque scenery. Fig. 21 shows the stage arch Jones used for Albions Triumph, 1609; it is described in this passage from Nicoll:

The first thing that presents itself to the eye was the Ornament that went about the Scene; in the midst of which was placed a great Armes of the Kings, with Angels holding an Emperiall Crowne, from which hung a Drapery of crimson Velvet fringed with gold, tacket in severall knotts that on each side, with many folds, was wound about the Pilasters.  

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50Allardyce Nicoll, Stuart Masques and the Renaissance Stage, (London: George G. Harrap & Company Limited, 1937), p. 44. Nicoll attributes this passage to Townsend. Nicoll points out that the stage arch in Jones's designs was so much a part of the scenic decoration that it was often referred to as the ornament. See Fig. 20, Jones's Tragic Scene.
Fig. 19. Theatre Plan by Inigo Jones. From Nicoll, The Development of the Theatre.
Fig. 21. Frontispiece or Proscenium Arch for Albions Triumph (1609). Design by Inigo Jones. From Nicoll, The Development of the Theatre.
Fig. 20. The Tragic Scene by Inigo Jones. From Nicoll, The Development of the Theatre.
Although the classical features of the decorated stage arch Jones used in his masque designs diminished, the tradition of the stage arch as part of the total scenic decoration continued. This is also true of the Bibiena design in the latter part of the seventeenth century. In Fig. 22, a design of a decorated stage arch by F. da Bibiena, there are only slight traces of the ancient tradition in the use of pilasters and capitals. It is still, however, obviously part of the total decoration of the scene.

In the late seventeenth century the stage arch began to become a more permanent part of the theatre, but this did not affect its decorative nature. The tradition of the ancient theatres was still carried on. In Munich, at the Salvator Theatre, 1662, Francesco Santurini designed the scenery for the performance of L'Oronte. This design (Fig. 24) demonstrates quite clearly the extension of the tradition of decorated stage arches into the seventeenth century. Compare the stage arch in Fig. 24 with the top center section of the facades of Fig.'s 1 and 2. One would almost suspect that these units were lifted out of these Roman theatres and sent to Munich. Note the pilasters, niches, and figures at
Fig. 22. Proscenium design by F. da Bibiena.
From Nicoll, *The Development of the Theatre.*
Fig. 24. Setting for L'Oronte (Salvator Theatre, Munich, 1662). Design by Francesco Santurini, Nicoll.
the top sides of the cornices, in both the Roman theatres
and the design for L'Oronte.51

Cheney's view that the arches after the Teatro
Farnese lost their classical heritage and became merely
frames for the painted picture-stage is not substantiated.
The evidence seems to indicate that the tradition of the
decorated stage arch as part of the total scenic effect
goes on in the seventeenth century, not to the extent
demonstrated in the theatre at Parma, but still sub-
stantially.

This brings to the fore another one of Kernodle's
theories. The stage arch in the Renaissance, he notes
briefly, was used as setting. He attributes this, how­
ever, to the complication of the forestage. "Until that
forestage could be abolished," writes Kernodle, "the
proscenium itself had to be regarded as a scenic de­
vice."52 This seems dubious. In the first place, the
evidence just reviewed indicates that decorated stage
arches are traditional in the theatre; there is little
reason to assume that they would be less decorated and
less a part of the scenery if the forestage were not

51 Other examples of decorated stage arches of the
seventeenth century are shown in Fig.'s 23 and 25.

52 Supra, p. 9, n. 20.
Fig. 23. Setting for La Contesa (Ferrara, 1632) Design by F. Guitti, Nicoll.
Fig. 25. The Imperial Theatre (Vienna, 1690). Design by Lodovico Burnacini. Nicoll.
present. In the second place, in some countries, even after the forestage was abolished, the stage arches were still very much decorative and a part of the total scenic effect.\textsuperscript{53}

As was stated earlier in this chapter, the stage arch of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries served a dual purpose. In the tradition of the stage arch before the Renaissance, it served the function of part of the total scenic decoration. Its other function was not so traditional, but rather stemmed from the specific needs of the Renaissance court theatres. While the decorative arch is a part of the tradition of stage decoration, until the Renaissance it was integrated with the rest of the scenery. In the Renaissance theatre, however, the stage arch was moved to the front of the scene, not by accident, but for a specific purpose. That purpose is to mask stage machinery.

\textsuperscript{53}See Fig.'s 25-26-27. In all three of these designs the forestage is absent; yet, the stage arches are very much decorative, and in traditional manner no less. See the pilasters and statues in all of them. Perhaps what Kernodle means to imply, is that until the forestage could be abolished, the stage arch could not be regarded as a frame that separated the audience from the actor. This, of course, is a theatrical principle noted by Lawrenson, but not consistent with Kernodle's thesis in \textit{From Art to Theatre}.\)
Fig. 26. The New Theatre at Amsterdam (1774).
From Nicoll, The Development of the Theatre.
Fig. 27. Setting at Drottningholm, Sweden (1784).
From Simonson, *The Stage Is Set.*
The Theatrical Masking Device

The origin theorists see the emergence of the stage arch, at the front of the Renaissance perspective stage as a response to the need for framing the stage-picture.\textsuperscript{54} When viewed, however, from a theatrical point-of-view, the evidence does not seem to substantiate this view. If the concept of the stage as a painted picture is put aside, it becomes clear that the decorative stage arch emerged at the front of the stage in response to the need for masking. The need for masking in the early Renaissance theatres is apparent in the Serlian style theatre before the arch was finally moved to the front of the stage.

There is no direct proof that Serlio used stage machines. The evidence is mostly from inference. It is known that he was familiar with the works of Vitruvius, who supposedly describes the stage machines used in the ancient theatres.\textsuperscript{55} It is also known that Serlio used lamps to light his settings; his description of these are very full.\textsuperscript{56} That he used some kinds of stage machines

\textsuperscript{54}Supra, pp. 3-5, 7-8, and 13-14.

\textsuperscript{55}Lawrenson questions the use of stage machines in the ancient theatres and states that the only one described by Vitruvius is the periaktoi, which Serlio does not use. See Lawrenson, op. cit., p. 9.

\textsuperscript{56}Hewitt, ed. op. cit., p. 33. Translation by John H. McDowell.
is suggested by the following passage:

Here the horned and lucent moon rises slowly—so slowly that the spectators have not been aware of any movement. In other scenes the sun rises, moves on its course, and at the end of the play is made to set with such skill that many spectators remain lost in wonder. With like skill gods are made to descend from the skies and planets to pass through the air.57

It does not seem reasonable that Gods were made to descend from the skies and planets to fly through the air, without the use of some kind of machinery to execute these effects. How were these stage machines concealed? Apparently, they were concealed by the side house, and the cloud borders and valance.58 Kernodle refers to these scenic elements as partial framing devices.59 A more accurate and more theatrical interpretation marks them as partial masking devices.

From the time of Serlio the need for masking stage machinery seems to have increased. The masques and intermezzi of the Italian court theatres required


58Kernodle points out that there is no direct evidence that Serlio used a valance, but that his references to lighting lamps above the scene suggests a valance. In this he is probably right. Kernodle, op. cit., p. 193.

59Ibid.
descents from the heavens, Gods appearing amidst the clouds, nymphs on winged horses, and so on. Craig points up the need for masking in the court theatres in this passage:

The new theatres were usually erected in some big room in a palace . . . the platform generally had a proscenium of some kind, without an arch. These prosceniums were of light construction with painted decorations but as the machines they screened became more bulky, an arch was added. 60

Just when the complete arch was adopted is not certain; the first pictorial evidence of a complete decorated stage arch at the front of the scene is dated 1560. By the late sixteenth century, however, the tricks and spectacles of the intermezzi necessitated the quick changing of scenery, rendered difficult with the permanent side house. In any event, the decorated stage arch was popular and traditional in the theatre at the time, and it would have been a simple matter for Renaissance designers to shift it from within the scene to the front of the setting, as a decorative device, and at the same time solve their masking problems.

The necessity for changing the permanent side houses down front at either side of the stage (placed there by the prolongation of Serlian tradition) was a problem recognized by Sabbatini:

While the method described in the preceding chapter for making the first houses at the stage front is the most practical, and the most usual, yet it seems to have this defect. Sometimes when the scene of the houses has been changed to woods, mountains and so on, these two house fronts remain alone unchanged, and do not give either a pleasing or realistic impression. To obviate this difficulty, you may place at the front of the stage an arch with columns or statues, and build the scene within it. Beside the assurance that the part behind the scenes will not be seen, this arch will give a very grand splendor to the setting, and at the same time give a greater sense of depth to the perspective. Behind the arch a large number of lamps may be concealed for the purpose of illuminating not only the stage houses but the entire heavens as well. In constructing this arch, you must take care not to join it to the stage, but separate it as in the case of the front parapet. 61

What could demonstrate more clearly the use of the stage arch in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than this passage from Sabbattini. In clear theatrical terms he points out the necessity for masking to facilitate the changing of scenery— a practice, one might add, which

is peculiar to the art of the theatre and to no other. He specifically mentions the placement of the lamps where they will be concealed (behind the arch). His suggestion that the arch be decorated with pilasters and statues is in the best tradition of decorated stage arches.

The influence of Sabbattini was spread throughout Europe where perspective scenery was in use. In England, Inigo Jones was already using decorated stage arches as part of his scenery and as masking. In France, the Italian perspective and the machine-stage, discussed by Lawrenson, was introduced by Giacomo Torelli. For The Finta Pazza, 1645 (Fig. 16) the Torelli design shows the decorated stage arch masking the machines that control the cloud machine, and in Fig. 17, the winged cherub.

Even later in the seventeenth century, in an illustration of the Imperial Theatre, Vienna, in 1690 (Fig. 25) is seen the flying horseman amidst the clouds, operated apparently, by the machines masked by the traditionally decorated stage arch. The theatre in the late seventeenth century in France, is characterized by the elaborate use of machines. The complex machinery used to change scenes required that the stage arch become a permanent part of the theatre decoration. In Fig. 18, the faux chasis, and

62Lawrenson, op. cit., p. 91.
Fig. 16. Theatrical design by Giacomo Torelli.
From Nicoll, The Development of the Theatre.
Fig. 17. Theatrical design by Giacomo Torelli. From Nicoll, The Development of the Theatre.
Fig. 18. Stage Machinery of a Theatre in Paris in the late Seventeenth Century. From Cheney, *Stage Decoration*. 
a complex system of windlasses, levers, and counterweights of the *changement à vue* are seen masked partly by the theatre building structure, and at the sides by the arch.

From its beginnings in the early Renaissance to the present day, the function of the stage arch as a masking device is not expressed more clearly than by Richard Southern. Describing the results of an attempt to abolish the stage arch, by popular demand, at the Festive Theatre, Cambridge, he says:

Firstly, the electrician had to build a deep, solid border above, over the front of the stage to mask his great bridge for the lights. Then the stage carpenters had to put up two pairs of massive, plywood-covered screens upon the stage itself, either side, to reach up to this border and mask the wing space- and back you were at the picture-frame proscenium again.63

This is how it all began in the Serlian setting. When the evidence is viewed from a theatrical point-of-view, there is nothing to indicate that the stage arch emerged in the Renaissance in response to the need for framing the picture-stage.

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CHAPTER IV
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

The pattern seems clear. The tradition of the decorated stage arch can be traced back to the Roman, and subsequently to the Greek theatres. This tradition of classically decorated stage arches survives into the Renaissance in the copying of theatre traditions by Medieval easel-painters, in the use of the decorated triumphal arch in the Royal Entry, and in the arcade arches interpreted from the works of Vitruvius. In the early Renaissance theatres the traditional decorated arch was incorporated into the rest of the scenery as part of the stage decoration. With the introduction and increasing use of stage machinery, as evidenced in the work of Serlio and Sabbattini, necessitating the need for masking, the decorated arch was moved to the front of the stage as a decorative and masking device. The stage arch served this dual purpose throughout the seventeenth century. Toward the end of the seventeenth century the stage arch took on a new theatrical function, of enclosing and framing the scene and separating the audience from the stage action. This, however, did not occur until after the
forestage was abolished, the decoration of the arch began to wane, and a new type of drama was presented. Here is where, it may be said, the modern stage began. From its earliest beginnings to the present day, however, the stage arch has never ceased to serve as a masking device.

Conclusions

There are really only four main conclusions that this writer draws from this study, but these four seem significant for the theatre student and theatre historian. First, there is little reason to assume that because the concept of framing and enclosing is related to both the practices of the theatre and the practices of the other visual arts, that they are one and the same concept. Theatrical framing and enclosing is based on principles which are peculiar to the art of theatre and to no other.

Second, there is no tangible evidence, thus far presented by anyone, to support the theory that the modern stage arch derived from the conventions of medieval easel-painters; or that the stage arch must be regarded as a picture-frame in the Renaissance and seventeenth century theatres. The use of the stage arch at the front of the perspective settings in the Renaissance theatre through the seventeenth century, is based on the theatrical practice of scenic decoration, and on the theatrical practice of masking stage machinery.
Third, in the tracing of origins, the modern stage arch resembles the sixteenth and seventeenth century stage arch in only two ways. One is the similarity in shape, and the other is that in both cases the stage arch serves as a masking for stage machinery. The theories which attempt to trace the modern stage arch back to its origin in terms of framing lack force. The attempt of historians, moreover, to make the evidence fit the theory, as exemplified in the picture-frame interpretation of the Renaissance stage arch, has resulted in an interpretation of the theatre in general, which in basic philosophy is untheatrical, and in some cases, ill-suited to the study of the theatre.

Fourth, the inclusion of other art forms in the practices and studies of the theatre, does not necessarily deny the existence of theatrical traditions and principles which justify the study of the theatre apart from its related arts.
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