

FEATS 22 – Guide to the Use a Thrust Stage

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Summary

A thrust stage juts or “thrusts” out into the audience. Thrust playing spaces were the traditional configuration of the Elizabethan theatre and afforded great intimacy between actors and audience, the need for very little scenery and gave the audience a three-dimensional view of the action.

Because the audience is on three sides, actors need to move frequently in order to be seen. Yet not all the time. Audiences are content to watch an actor’s back as long as they can see the faces of the others, and get a glimpse of the back-turned actor’s face now and again.

Keep the set to a minimum (and keep it low) and work on the diagonals. These give the thrust different acting areas. Use them without concentrating for too long on only one area.

Exploit the closeness of action to audience to imaginatively create the world of the play.

Main Attributes

What is a thrust stage?

The playing space of a thrust stage juts or “thrusts” out into the audience. This distinguishes it from a proscenium stage, which is located at one end of the theatre with all audience facing it head on.

Actor/Audience Intimacy

The action of the play set on a thrust stage moves forward into the audience, not back and forth in front of it. In this configuration, the audience can even feel as though it is included in the action on the stage. Not only are the actors close to and moving between the audience, the audience itself can see those audience members seated directly across the stage. In this way, enjoying other audience members as they enjoy the play is an added aspect of the performance.

Less Scenery

Theatre has traditionally relied on the imagination of the audience to create the time and place of the action, yet over the centuries, scenery has come to play a more and more important role in creating the play’s location. The thrust stage is not conducive to much scenery, since the sight lines from audience on one side or the other would be blocked by placements anywhere other than extreme upstage. Plays staged on a thrust

must therefore rely on the imagination of the audience and the use of minimal set pieces. This benefits the imaginative quality of the performance.

3-D Effect

Instead of viewing the action from a flattened-out perspective, audience members watch the action in three dimensions. Actors walk past the audience, sometimes entering and exiting from among them. This relationship between actor and audience heightens the naturalness of the presentation. Actors aren't standing side-by-side, slightly "turned out," so that they can be seen having an intimate conversation, as they would be on a proscenium. On a thrust stage, actors are able to face each other directly. And since the performance is seen from three different angles, each audience member is seeing a slightly "different" play, depending on which side of the stage they are sitting.

Choice of Stage (acting area) for 2022

Thrust only

In this configuration, the main (or house) curtain can be fully closed, leaving the thrust as the acting area. Decorative items can be placed against the curtain so as to provide a backdrop to the action. Be aware, though, that the curtains are a rich blue. Because they meet in the middle, actors can enter/exit here.

Can the 'stage' acting area be combined with the thrust?

By all means, but there are pitfalls. The focus of the action must be carefully planned so that the yawning opening of the much large 'stage' acting area behind the thrust does not sap the energy from out of the intimate thrust area. If the action is on the thrust and the 'stage' acting area is kept lit (unless for mood or ambiance), then the audience eye will continually wander to the 'stage' acting area (drawn by the light). An empty space behind the area where the action is happening tends to draw out the energy that should be concentrated on the action.

If desired, the main curtain can be set at a partial opening, smaller than the general open position, to create a smaller acting area behind the thrust, or even an entrance/exit. Please, however, be aware of sightlines. Nothing is more frustrating to an audience member who is seated in a side block and who can't see what is happening on stage because the curtain is in the way.

The same situation can occur if projections are being used on the back of the main acting area.

Can the 'stage' acting area be used without the thrust?

Yes, it can. Be aware, however, that audience members in the side blocks, who are basically facing the thrust, will have to crane their heads at an angle to see the action. Depending on the length of the play, this can become intensely uncomfortable.

If the choice is for the 'stage' acting area only, ask the question why. If it's because it's what you know, throw caution to the winds and dive in. Everyone has to start somewhere. Make yours the supportive atmosphere of FEATS.

Can a 'thrust'-rehearsed play be played with a front-on audience?

Perhaps you don't have access to a thrust stage when you are performing on your home ground and so will perform in your usual space where the audience is front-on. The positioning of actors (or blocking, if you prefer that term) will be different, and thus the dynamics of play. It is possible, of course, but will need re-

rehearsing. Better would be to play in hall somewhere, with smaller audiences on three sides (even if on the same level), so that the actors really get a feel for playing so close to the audience. What should be avoided is the stage shock that can occur when an actor suddenly realises the audience is not only clearly visible but within touching distance (almost). It is wonderful for an actor to experience the audience so close, to be able to play for them, honestly and openly, but they should be given the opportunity to perform like this, before being thrust onto the Festival stage (if you'll excuse the pun).

From a Director's Perspective

Choice of play

Are some plays more suited to a thrust stage than others? Yes, but this doesn't mean there are some plays you cannot stage on a thrust. A farce with numerous doors that open and close at precise moments and hide whoever is behind them until they open, will certainly pose difficulties. The question that should be asked when selecting plays is: is this a work that will benefit from being up close to an audience, without recourse to much set and setting? In other words, how much theatrical artifice is needed, or can this be replaced imaginatively by the work of the actors?

Rehearsing

The only thing that should change from your preferred way of working is not to think 'where is the audience'. A useful approach in the initial stages, when actors are finding their feet, is to ignore the audience altogether and rehearse as if there were no audience, anywhere. This will free the actors (and director) to look at the dynamic relationships between characters, rather than where must I stand in order to be seen/not to block. When the need later comes to consolidate positioning, this can, of course, be done.

Hint: Always change where you are in the rehearsal room. The actors will automatically assume that where you are is where they should be playing to (i.e. the audience). If you move around, they will get used to playing to different directions.

Staging (positioning and movement of actors)

The method of setting the positions of the actors and how they move can become obsolete on a thrust stage, because each group of audience sees the action from a different angle. No-one, however, only wants to see the same actor's back for long minutes at a time, so it becomes important that actors move, that they turn their heads to allow their faces (at least profile) to be seen. Yet this can be incorporated with great naturalness into the play of the actor. As people, we are constantly moving, and this freedom to move naturally can be used to great advantage on a thrust stage, underlying the dynamic relationship between characters. There will, of course, be moments when certain actors have to be in certain positions, but being allowed, during rehearsals, to move at will around the stage can lead to exciting configurations which can then be incorporated into the action. A great tip is for actors to play to the whole audience, every one of them, wherever they are seated.

A good position for an actor to stand without blocking an audience member's view is at the angle between seating blocks (which can also very effectively be used as entrances and exits). (In theatre jargon, this is known as a *vom*, from the Greek *vomitorium*, from whence actors issued onto stage.) Having a character stand here, just out of the light, can be very effective. Not in the action, but observing it, partly visible in the reflected light from the stage, a shadowy presence.

One position to avoid is to have an actor, who has a lot to say and who must be well lit, stand at the edge of the acting area, facing inwards (i.e. with back to the audience at that edge), because to light the actor's face from a desirable angle, will probably cause the faces of the audience members sitting behind also to be lit. Use the edge position by all means, but be aware of the pitfalls.

Set and setting

A similar problem can occur with set. No audience member wants to look at the rear of a high-backed chair for too long, no matter how beautiful. They are there to see the actors. It is useful to work closely with the set designer from very early on to ensure there is nothing unnecessary. Because once on stage, set tends to stay, except if it is carried off by the actors. (Having crew suddenly appear can break the complicity between action and audience who will believe almost anything they are encouraged to believe, until that moment when you break their trust by telling them it's all made up, by, for instance, having a stagehand appear to change set.)

The play might call for a fireplace in front of which a character always sits. The only place to put such a large item without obstructing views is in an entrance (which then obstructs that entrance and blocks the diagonal) or at the back, upstage (where the character will have their back to almost the whole audience). You might be able to do away with it altogether by creating it imaginatively in the way the actors react/refer to it. The audience will believe you have a fireplace. But don't then 'do away' with it later – as far as the audience is concerned, it is still there!

A useful way to cut down on unnecessary set (and props) is to start with nothing during rehearsals, and only introduce an item if it becomes vital. That beautiful dresser you had in mind might in fact be superfluous, so ask yourself, what is its purpose? If only to 'set the scene', is there another way to do this?

Any set on a thrust can impede the action, especially if it blocks the diagonals. And stops the actors from moving. See also Set designer below.

From an Actor's Perspective

Actors on a front-on stage know that marvellous feeling when an audience is with you. Imagine what it's like when you're surrounded by that audience. It can be extraordinarily exhilarating and rewarding. You need only to be open and honest and simple, because a close audience will see through any artifice (unless, of course, that is what is intended). A certain naturalness can be called for because the audience can see and read all the nuances in an actor's face and comportment. And they will be with you – you are surrounded by friends to whom you can play. Enjoy the freedom of knowing you don't have to face in an unnatural direction when talking with fellow actors on stage, almost no matter where you are, your face will be seen. But move, so that others can also see it. Play to everyone in the audience, no matter where they are seated.

From a Designer's Perspective

Set design

The thrust stage demands creative set and prop design, such as 'container-like' set pieces that serve double duty as both props and storage. On the thrust stage the scale is smaller, units must be more detailed and also believable as they are visible from all sides. There can be no thoughts of a "box set" with three walls and doors and windows. Audience sight lines must be rethought, and continual attention paid to them. As there is no 'front' of the stage, the designer must think of diagonals.

A ground plan is the key to a successful production on a thrust stage. It must be thoroughly thought out and examined for sight line obstacles. A useful design is one that will fan out from the centre. The use of a central object approachable from all sides will avoid the deadlines of a cleared space and will provide the obstacle course so necessary in a dynamic ground plan. Dividing the stage into 3 or 4 major acting areas and then using these areas in combinations with only occasional use of one area, a dynamic interlocking of the stage will result, and all three audiences will see the play equally well. (Note: this depends on the size of the thrust, which for FEATS22 is fairly compact.)

A ground plan could rake the objects onstage along diagonal lines, helping the majority of the house to see most of the action. You can also see that compositionally, using a triangle made by three figures is very effective on the thrust stage, not only for the person at the apex of the triangle. Placing covered scenery on this stage would certainly obscure audience vision, but when skeletal frames are introduced, you have both good vision and the suggestion of scenery. Looking through such frames is no problem at all for audiences, for we actually see much in real life through interrupted views. Details of scenic elements, door frames, seats with low or without backs, etc. are viable.

Don't forget the floor itself, it becomes a much more integral part of the set when on a thrust. Perhaps a carpet can be effective.

And remember: There are at least 4 possible entrances to the space
 Think diagonally
 Think low.

From a Stage Lighting Perspective

It is essential that the lighting designer thinks 3-dimensionally. A frontlight for one group of audience is a sidelight for another and a backlight for a third. The only light that looks the same from all angles is downlight. And if you're aiming for a particular lighting effect for an actor close to the edge of the acting area, remember that the light doesn't stop at the actor – it will continue past until it hits something else, and hopefully not an audience member full in the face. Convince the director that placing an actor at the very edge of the acting area, close to the audience and facing inward, might prove problematic, if the director wants the actor's face to be well lit.

It's important to try to keep the ability to separate areas of the stage. And think of colour and texture.