

***Afterpieces:
A miscellany of well-considered trifles***

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Staircases and their theatrical impact

The largest staircase I can ever recall appeared in a wonderful production by the Chicago Lyric Opera of Marc Blitzstein's *Regina* (2003-04 season), an adaptation of Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* (1939). In Hellman's play, a Broadway drama set in the American deep south, Regina Giddens, the matriarch of the rapacious, conscienceless Hubbard family, shows herself willing to go to any lengths, even robbery, fraud, and manslaughter by neglect, in order to capitalise on the benefits of new cotton-production technology. The Lyric Opera production featured a gigantic red-carpeted staircase at the centre of the stage, wide enough for the entire cast of principals to walk up and down upon abreast (though of course they didn't do that), and sufficiently well thought-out to include a landing a third of the way up, where a side table, lamp, and chair were set and where certain, more intimate scenes of the opera could be staged. The scene designer, John Culbert, had evidently read Hellman's play carefully. The first thing mentioned in Hellman's opening stage directions describing the Giddens living room is the upstage "staircase leading to the second story." Subsequent directions indicate it has a landing, where, later in Act III, Horace Giddens, Regina's husband, suffering from terminal heart disease, collapses on the stairs and falls out of sight as he draws his last breath. The staircase, central both to the visual design and the action, continues to figure critically in the closing moments, when Regina, who earlier in the act had declined

to traverse the steps to retrieve Horace's life-saving prescription drugs and simply watched him die, is now in retreat, up those same steps, as her daughter Alexandra, suspecting her mother's complicity in her father's death, begins to assert a new dominance in the family.¹ The grand design for the Chicago Lyric production of Blitzstein's opera evidently drew important visual ideas from the Hellman script that could be made to yield thematic insights parallel to Hellman's setting; given the great size and circling sweep of the Lyric's staircase, they could address other values as well. Slowly but surely, the staircase came to symbolise the determined rise of the Hubbard family, predicated on the plan to take the gin to the cotton instead of carrying the cotton to the gin. Investment in industry of this kind will reap large financial rewards for the Hubbard brothers, they believe, investment represented symbolically by the great scale of the staircase, which rises from the very centre of the stage and curves upwards and eventually off left, at a height four or five times the height of a normal human being, with no visible bracing or other means of support, and with a bannister on only one side (the stage right side), leaving the other side completely open and potentially hazardous. And so there are ironic qualities in its very design, as it moots possibilities for plans to go awry (which they do). Upstage, in a vast expanse behind it, stands a system of interlocking screens, through which can be seen lush foliage suggestive of a deep south plantation. The screens have three levels, sturdy enough to hold three separate phalanxes of townspeople, the chorus, for the second-act party scene, interpolated into Hellman's original text. Without this chorus (their presence only quasi-realistic) and without the magnificent staircase that partly impedes our view of them, *Regina* could be staged as a chamber opera—much to the diminished pleasure of the Lyric Opera audience, one would suppose. It hardly mattered, given the spectacular results of this beautifully mounted, wonderfully sung production, whether it was the need for a chorus that drove the design and introduction of the staircase, or vice versa.²

Staircases as part of stage settings have a long history, of course. They occur as early as the interior staircase within the facade of Shakespeare's Globe, strictly pragmatic and out of sight, but lending important access to the balcony above, the second-level playing area where Richard II, Juliet, and a host of other characters can attain the loft and dominance over the stage below that they and the action of the play require. By the late 19th century, the advance of stage technology afforded modern scene designers manifold opportunities for near-miraculous engineering and astonishing visual results.³ One could ransack the images published in Volume 2

of Fuerst and Hume's *Twentieth-Century Stage Direction* and find a series of prime examples, including settings of two plays directed by Reinhardt dating from the first decade of the twentieth century with central, dominating staircases and a third, also a Reinhardt production, of *The Merchant of Venice* featuring a disappearing interior central staircase and, in a second scene, no fewer than three, at left, centre, and right. Reinhardt's contemporary Adolph Appia would, of course, be unimaginable without the abstract, unadorned staircases that connect the flat horizontal and upright planes of such productions of his as Gluck's *Orphée* (1906) and Wagner's *Die Walküre* (1923). Gerhardt Bucholz's 1925 design for a Wiesbaden production of Richard Strauss's operatic version of *Salome* hardly leaves any floor space visible, to judge from the multiple sets of stairs rising at an oblique angle across almost the entire width of the stage opening.⁴

Nor are staircases invariably connected with high art, grand opera, or the avant-garde and esoteric. Jo Mielziner's design for the stage setting of the "Miss America Contest" sequence in the film *American Venus* (1936) bore the unmistakable impress of Appia's abstract staircases and high flat panels—two parallel ranges of staircases, one above the other, rising towards the offstage and converging toward centre stage so as to abut a centrally placed, wide rectangular platform five steps high. In its own turn, Mielziner's design set an easy and obvious visual precedent for the series of Busby Berkeley musicals that would eventually follow and, according to Mary Henderson, was itself probably influenced by the kind of revue designs typified by the Ziegfeld Follies.⁵

¹Lillian Hellman, *The Little Foxes*, in *Lillian Hellman: The Collected Plays* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), 139, 206-7.

²*Regina*, opera by Marc Blitzstein, Chicago Lyric Theatre, 12 October 2003, new production, John Mauceri, cond.; Charles Newell, dir. With Catherine Malfitano in the title role.

³See M. R. Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850-1910*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), passim.

⁴Walter René Fuerst and Samuel J. Hume, *Twentieth-Century Stage Decoration, Vol. 2: Illustrations* (1929; rpt. New York: Dover Publications, 1967), figs. 30, 31, 32-33, 38, 39, 214.

⁵Mary C. Henderson, *Mielziner: Master of Modern Stage Design* (New York: Watson-Guption, 2001), 62.