CHAPTER FOUR : Production and Performance

Time for you and time for me,
And yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

T.S. Eliot

French semiotician Patrice Pavis, much inspired by Saussure, preferred to consider
the theatre in its entirety, the semiotic features intertwining into a coherent whole.* A
dialogic interaction followed between the stage and the auditorium as audiences
developed polysemic interpretation – each sign on stage unfolding possibilities of
meaning, depending upon the class, culture, race, ideology of a pluralistic British
society. The American philosopher Charles S. Peirce (1839 - 1914) considered each
stage feature as endowed with one to one parity with the referent outside with a
specific meaning attached to it. Peirce underscored ‘existing’ meaning, Pavis allowed
meaning to be construed or ‘constructed’. This construction, the act of experiencing
and bodying forth of a play by theatre groups again, is a contemporary event,
contemporary to each production, progressively evolving with the audience
community. Variant accents in stage production correspond to the auditor sensibility
at different points of time and in different cultural ambience even as the playwright’s

* Colin Counsell assures us, ‘For Saussure … signs can only operate as part of a system, for it is from
the system as a whole that their meanings derive’. Signs of Performance: An Introduction to
involvement in planning stage strategies of his own time in a sense record extension of his creative effort.

Naturalism and Realism had been the modes dominating theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century. Soon enough, non-naturalism made inroads disrupting mainstream theatrical agenda. Bernard Bergonzi once regretted that Eliot’s U-turn to naturalistic theatre after a non-naturalistic spur was ironic, ‘He did so just before the advent of Beckett as a dramatist and the delayed impact of Brecht in the English theatre showed the immense possibilities of an expressive and non-naturalistic drama, even without the obligations of being formally poetic’.

Bertolt Brecht, working with a ‘constancy of purpose’ and an amalgam of cultural resources – borrowed and indigenous – pop, folk and high art, introduced the ‘epic theatre’. The operative strategy adopted was of the ‘montage’; scenes distanced in time, location and social stratum were pitted against each other to generate a dialectic or contradiction of forces. Psychological projection came secondary to a reading prompted by the clash of socio-historical powers. Stage props on bare stage (as opposed to the details of naturalistic theatre) and ‘gestus’ or the acting vocabulary of ‘gesture’, ‘capable of indicating social positions and relationships’, were intended to bear marks of power-relations and ideological imbalance. By promoting theatre as artifice, Brecht created the effect of ‘distancing’ or ‘alienation’ between stage and auditorium so that the audience was left to form its own discourse as against the discourse of the performance. Like Eliot, he was committed to a cause, but whereas Eliot reformed his audience by honing sensibilities, Brecht did so by enforcing them to critical thinking.

* cabaret, melodrama, commedia delle art, Expressionism, Greek oration, for example;
Samuel Beckett’s (1906-89) ‘Theatre of Absence’ also revolves around the art of on-stage ‘manufacturing of meaning’. He refuses to grant any sense, order or meaning to this universe; his is a godless world where science and religion serve as grand narratives to impose a semblance of meaning to save man from existential anguish. Beckett utilizes the theatrical medium to convey the meaninglessness of a contrived meaning, and in trying to do so projects meaninglessness as a message – a meaning on another level.

Normally, stage props are symbolic of the real thing outside, and every material object on stage is accepted as a signifier for a potential concept beyond it; words become signs of thought and feeling, material objects for an immaterial truth. Beckett refuses to accept the symbolic value of material things; the assurance of a transcendental world beyond the material is totally ruled out. Components on stage stand for what they are without leading us further; Colin Counsell, in *Signs of Performance*, notes, ‘By such means Beckett depicts a world devoid of meaning, and does so at the level of signification itself.’

The idea of stage-auditorium communication, the relation between actor and viewer, finds its champion and crusader in Peter Brook (b.1925). ‘Reality’, Brook maintains, is always experienced on two different levels as ‘two worlds’. His ‘theatre of ritual’ flourished in the 60s and 70s just after the Eliot phase. Brook, in the tradition set by Eliot, fights the spiritual decay of the modern world through ritual theatre. Enactment of rituals, he affirms, redirects one’s mind to the spiritual and the ‘Invisible’, cutting across hurdles of rationalism and materialism. Since ritual is a collective act, the entire community is cleansed as it were through its periodic reversal to the sacred and the divine. Observing the real worth of rituals in our life and considering their signification in Brook’s scheme of thought, Colin Counsell
comments, ‘In the general sense, the purpose of these activities is not functional but symbolic, for the primary goal of religious celebrations . . . is to image the divine, to create in the profane world a moment in space / time that is sacred.’ Brook creates his ‘Holy Theatre’ with this intent; but there is also a Levi Straussian angle* to his goal. In performing rituals, we not only celebrate the divine but also reaffirm our sense of ‘communitas’.

The 1934 production of *Sweeney Agonistes*, as Desmond MacCarthy reviews in *The Listener*, was remarkable for its stage-manipulation in creating the ‘communitas’. The treatment was essentially pathbreaking as the audience was made to serve as a kind of chorus with the actors sitting amidst them:

> I found myself in an L-shaped room on the third floor, round which seats had been arranged leaving an empty space in the middle, where stood a table with some drinks on it and some unoccupied chairs. It was in this space that the performance took place.4

Peter Ackroyd recounts how, at the Oct. 1935 production of the play, ‘. . . the performance members of the cast, wearing masks, came down among the audience (chanting words of murder and nightmare)’.5

The ritual participation of the audience in *Murder in the Cathedral* productions of 1935 and much later in 1993 too, was assured by the very nature of the playhouses in which they were enacted. The first production came up in the Chapter House of Canterbury Cathedral and the latter in the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-

* ‘From a Lévi Straussian perspective, one of ritual’s most important functions is to perpetuate the community’s sense of group identity. The ostensible purpose of a ritual may be to celebrate spiritual beliefs but its actual effect is to assert the communal nature of such beliefs, writing them into the collective cultural consciousness so that they become a part of our individual sense of identity . . . In participating in the ritual, we demonstrate our allegiance not only to the common creed but also to the community which espouses it.’ Colin Counsell, Ibid., p. 144.
Avon. Both had single entrance at the rear of the hall through which both the audience and the characters entered and dispersed. When Beckett’s body was carried away by the priests along the 90 ft long aisle of the Chapter House with audience on both sides, and then through the cloisters which had historically been the passage of Becket’s retreat, the moment became a virtual replay of the actual event in which all the witnesses were made to share in and comprehend the significance of Martyrdom.

Michael Elliott’s 1966 production of *Family Reunion* offered a similar participatory experience. The play was enacted on the floor of the rehearsal room itself at the Central School of Speech and Drama, encircled by the audience. Harry entered through the room, stood amidst the audience, and had a long look with them at his family members occupying a lighted portion of the acting arena. This closeness ensured the role of audience as watchers and also lessened the inscrutability of Harry’s experience. Bonding with the protagonist strengthened, as the Eumenides appeared between Harry and the audience giving them a feel of facing the ‘inquisitorial eye’.

II

The ‘production’ of Eliot’s plays went through several stages of experimentation and modification in the hands of producers, directors, designers and actors. The ‘text’ underwent innumerable revisions in the hands of the author himself. From the letters written to his friends and associates it appears that Eliot kept the presentation angle open and relied on the discretion of his director-producer friends. He was open to suggestions not only at the inception level or during rehearsals but interestingly even after the play had clinched success and acclaim.
More than professionalism, it all seems to have originated in a compelling need for penetrating grasp and deep communion, guided by the dual principles of reaching out to the audience across the board, and charting the soul’s quest for truth in a world of chaotic misconceptions. Christopher Ricks in the Panizzi Lectures 2002 entitled *Decisions and Revisions in T. S. Eliot* examines the revisions accomplished in his essays and poems, but leaves out the plays. He upholds the view that second thoughts, revised judgments or fresh insights are a strength rather than an impediment in Eliot’s work.

As thoroughly charted out by Browne, Eliot’s plays, we note, evolved through several versions of notes, synopses, scenario, roughs and drafts. Right from their embryonic stage the plays were sent out to friends and associates for close inspection and open criticism. Eliot guided his craft along the lines of thought offered; *Murder in the Cathedral* is a classic case in point. The first draft of this play containing a few passages in prose was sent to Rupert Doone who suggested their transformation in verse. He also conceived the Four Tempters as projection of Becket’s inner conflict. Later, a part of the 1st Act followed by a revised version of the whole Act, was sent to Browne who pointed out its lack of dramatic momentum and excess of abstract thought. He also suggested editing out some lines from the second priest’s speech (on the irrecoverability of Time – which later emerged as the poem ‘Burnt Norton’)* which held up the action for long. Faber and Faber published the first printed text version just before the first performance night on 19 June 1935.

* P. Ackroyd notes, ‘this was the first long poem in which he used the emphases and cadences of speech . . . the tone of someone addressing an audience, speaking out loud rather than to himself. In ‘Burnt Norton’ we see the poet as orator’. *T.S.Eliot*, (London : Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1984, Published in Abacus by Sphere Books Ltd., 1985), p. 230.
For a tidying up of dramatic lapses Eliot probably sweated most for *Family Reunion*. Naturalistic surface, non-naturalistic verse and moral-spiritual issues in modern setting had to be matched for the first time in this play. Martin Browne charts the play’s progression through the several drafts presently available – a) ‘D5’ or first draft of Part I (John Hayward Collection), b) ‘Harvard’ draft (Houghton Library Collection), c) Draft of March 1938 (Browne’s own possession), d) ‘D4’ (Hayward Collection). Lyndall Gordon in *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (Appendix V) discerns ‘at least ten . . . layers of composition following Eliot’s first reference to a new play (*Family Reunion*), along the same lines as *Sweeney Agonistes*, in a letter to director Hallie Flanagan in February 1934’. The drafts were offered to five people for expert comment: Martin Browne, Ashley Dukes, Emily Hale, John Hayward and Frank Morley. Eliot’s meticulousness was exemplary not just on the literary aspect but more on the theatrical aspect. He wrote to Martin Browne, ‘I am not certain of all my entrances and exits. I have an uncomfortable feeling that some of the entrances may appear fortuitous and unmotivated, and especially the entrance of Mary in the last scene’. Although Lyndall Gordon complains of Eliot imprisoning Mary in a ‘wait and watch’ role merely, Browne considers her as the most revised character in the play: ‘By the time the script has reached this final-stage, Mary has become one of the most living people in the play, and one of those who has most hold upon the audience’.

It is interesting to note that the revised drafts of the plays manifest a marked progression in attitude and conviction. The love scenes in *The Elder Statesman* for example, as Peter Ackroyd points out, were not as mellow and tender in the first draft, as they were in the final publication written after Eliot’s blissful marriage to Valerie. The title of *The Cocktail Party* too was not the same in its earlier drafts. Eliot himself
commented in a letter to playwright Djuna Barnes, dated 19 August. 1949 – ‘The Cocktail Party is the name of it, but that’s only what I call it in order to entice the public – the esoteric name is UPADHAMMAM SAMUPPADA,* but nobody would promote a play with a name like that. Well, we’ll see’.9 Nobody further considered the implications of the esoteric title, with the result that it soon passed into oblivion. Various accounts however still exist on the well known other title of the play, namely, One-Eyed Reily. The original title of Murder in the Cathedral, retained in its drafts and manuscripts as Fear in the Way also underwent transformation. Browne realized that it ‘was relevant both to Becket’s temptations and to the experience through which the Chorus had to pass; but as play-title,’ 10 it was not ‘attractive’. Eliot himself was doubtful about the effectiveness of the title; thus when Henzie Raeburn (Browne’s wife) suggested Murder in the Cathedral, Eliot found in it the right combination of ritual and homicide, of ironic implication and excitement of a contemporary thriller.

On the title of Family Reunion too, both Martin Browne and Ashley Dukes had alternate suggestions to offer. In a letter to Eliot, on March 8, 1938, Dukes wrote:

We are both eagerly interested in the new play, which I have read several times. First the title. I wanted to suggest something like pursuit or horizontal doom . . . I think on reflection Meet at Wishwood would seem to be expressive enough. Does it not also contain the same basic idea as A Family Reunion, or would not The Meet at Wishwood say the same thing in a satiric way as The Family Reunion? And still bring in the Furies as a pack?11

Eliot normally consented to suggestions but, as Martin Browne points out, at times he ‘could firmly go his own way . . . The matter of the play’s title was an instance of this; Ashley Dukes’s alternatives had no appeal’.12 A stronger instance of Eliot’s firm assertion was evinced with respect to Family Reunion when he turned down a

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* The Pali term, in the Buddhist context, as kindly explained on personal request by Mahabodhi Society, Calcutta, would imply, ‘Arising out of the call of a path’. 

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collective request from Emily, Martin Browne, and Morely to develop Mary’s character and substantiate her relationship with Harry.

On a contrary note, even directors could be rude enough to reject the author’s pleas. Such was the case with the first performance of *Sweeney Agonistes* on 6 May 1933, directed by Hallie Flanagan. Eliot added twenty five lines more to this production where an old gentleman enters at the end of the last chorus in the second fragment. He also suggested a few more details like masks for the characters, light drum taps throughout, non-expressive diction, stylization like Japanese Noh play and others. But at the premiere show Eliot found Flanagan’s ‘rendition of the play quite different from his own intention’. He, however approved of it and considered her conceptualization of the play as markedly better than his own. For the second production of *Sweeney Agonistes* (11 Nov 1934) director Rupert Doone rejected Eliot’s passage prepared for Flanagan. He created his own conclusion instead, – a violent one though, based on ‘Sweeney Erect’. He presents Sweeney with a razor in hand, chasing Doris around a table. The play ends with a police-whistle, Doris’s scream, sound of knocks at the door, and finally a total blackout. Randy Malamud observes that a series of blackouts utilized by Doone in this play matches well with the play’s fragmentary nature and creates ‘the effect of an Expressionistic montage’. Critics hypothesize that ‘the success of this effect may have influenced Eliot not to further integrate the fragments that remain of the play into any larger work’.  

Dramatizing the concluding portion of *Family Reunion* is another instance of the director’s assertion over the playwright. On the runic recitals of Agatha towards the end of this play, Eliot had his reservations. The recital, along with ritual gestures, generated the desired mood of awe and mystery, coupled with a sense of hope evoked by the closing chant of ‘This way the pilgrimage’. Eliot wanted to do away

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with this entire portion considering it to be undramatic. As evident from a letter to E. Martin Browne he had suggested to Peter Brook to leave out Agatha’s final runes at the end of Act I and Act II – ‘didn’t we find the play was more dramatic without them? and the final curtain down the moment the audience has taken in Denham and the birthday cake’. Peter Brook refused to accept this suggestion as he found the runes theatrically valid. On a contrary note, directors did eliminate portions if they found it theatrically invalid, as is Harry’s speech in Part I, sc. ii, ll 174-181, often left out of performances owing to its obscurity.

...The bright colour fades

Together with the unrecapturable emotion,

The glow upon the world, that never found its object;

And the eye adjusts itself to a twilight

Where the dead stone is seen to be batrachian,

The aphyllous branch ophedian.

Revisions for Eliot were not necessarily textual but performative as well. Browne once rued Eliot’s lack of contact with the theatre and his ignorance of the actor’s art. Eliot worked in unison with his director friend Browne to painstakingly hammer out the form and content of the plays and their stage suitability. As pointed out earlier, the Tempters doubled as knights in 1935 on Browne’s suggestion, the roles were segregated in 1953 on Eliot’s wish, doubled again in 1972.

_Murder in the Cathedral_ at Chapter House was supposed to be held without a break. This gave rise to the doubt as to whether a chorus right after the Sermon

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would be effective. Browne suggested a scene with the priests each carrying a banner to indicate 26th Dec as St. Stephen’s day, 27th Dec. as St. John’s Day, 28th Dec. as Day of the Holy Innocents. This sequence, recording the passing of time went off well at Canterbury but with the pause of an interval at the public theatre, the opening of Part II with a chorus appeared to have a greater impact. This was how the originally drafted chorus was introduced for the Mercury Theatre presentation and retained thereafter.*

The monotony of the long duologues in *Cocktail Party* was also avoided on Browne’s advice. Alex and Julia were made to appear recurrently towards the end of I i, I ii, and Act II to cut short the duologues into smaller units; the telegram in Act I sc. ii, served much the same purpose. The author-director duo also agreed on enhancing the comic element of the play and toning down the seriousness of the earlier drafts. More of verisimilitude and less of portentiousness was achieved by adding domestic details (by introducing the caterer’s man for example) and also by occasionally purging Reilly’s quotation from Shelley. In the American run of *Cocktail Party*, Browne shed off nine lines of Reilly’s quotation from *Prometheus Unbound*. He realized that Americans less familiar with the source in Shelley would be left bewildered; the lines however were restored to the British production later.

The horrific details of Celia’s death were also pruned after the Edinburgh Festival performance, ‘owing to the gratuitous details’. Celia’s reported death still remained problematic not only owing to the subsequent anti-climax but also because it could

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* Of all the components of *Murder in the Cathedral* the chorus provided the greatest scope for experimentation. Their numbers ranged from four to sixteen in various productions, their positioning changed from absolute immobility to ballet like movement (1953, Old Vic Production) and their costumes metamorphosed from uniformity to individual variety. Their voices also were orchestrated in singles and groups with variations in pitch and tone. With more and more lines granted to single voices and mobility allowed to match the speech, the chorus gained in dramatic force. In the 1953 production, majority of the lines were rendered solo and very little in unison. In the 1967 production of Martin Browne, with assured acting prowess of the individual members of the group, the chorus’s cry of horror rose to such a height that the knights had to struggle desperately hard to act out their apology.
not be assimilated into the closing phase of the play with a viable impact on the characters who continue living. Their understanding of Celia’s death remains detached and distanced, not emotional and human.

Editing and revision also issued out of Eliot’s interaction with the actors. Actors have expressed immense compatibility with the author while he was around during rehearsals. In ‘Eliot in the Theatre’ Sir Alec Guinness recalls how Eliot ‘penciled out’ at a rehearsal ‘sixteen lines with a smile’, considering the unease at a certain point in *Cocktail Party*. Again when the actor pointed out a phase of ‘overemphatic silence’ as he crossed from one part of the stage to another the author immediately composed four lines to cover up the gap – lines, Sir Alec describes as ‘witty, to the point and entirely helpful’. Cathleen Nesbitt also admitted sharing Eliot’s advice to her great benefit, in playing the role of Julia. Nevill Coghill recounts how Eliot informed her that ‘a pause was generally intended at the end of every line even though the sense ran on’. Coghill later applied this to a speech by Agatha in II, ii, 101-3 to find out how even an infinitesimal pause infused a sense of ‘groping’ and ‘tenderness’ into the lines.

On a different note, Leighton as Celia enjoyed the freedom granted to her by the playwright in his paucity of stage-direction. In an expressive statement she explained,

> I liked the part because no definite instructions are given to the actress by the author as to how Celia should look. The stage directions contain no long and involved notes about the dress and appearance of the girl, or how she walks and behaves in the presence of the other characters. A great deal is left to the producer and the actress, who, as she becomes more and more familiar with the lines, gets closer and closer to the character and is thus able to build up her own highly individual conception of the part.

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Eliot’s actors, perceptive participants as they were, could add to the intended dimension of the characters and this could pleasantly surprise even the playwright himself. In his Harvard lectures in 1950, Eliot defined his hero of *Family Reunion* as an ‘insufferable prig’ but, as quoted by Nevill Coghill, he was prompted to review this judgement in 1956 after seeing Paul Scofield play the part:

> I am writing to thank you for what you have done to redeem the part of Harry from the obloquy with which I myself (and alas many other people) have covered it. You are, in fact, the first to succeed in giving the impression of a *haunted* man – and if Harry isn’t haunted then he is insufferable! 17

**III**

Characterisation on stage itself is revealing. Robert Speaight, Robert Donat, and Richard Pasco or Michael Feast as Becket, Alec Guinness and Rex Harrison as Reilly, Margaret Leighton, Irene Worth, Eileen Atkins as Celia provide interesting profiles for study.

Speaight played Becket at the age of 31 while the saint at the time of martyrdom was 56 years of age. Becket’s 6’4” height moreover was met with the actor’s 5’ 8½” only. Yet he created history in acting chronicles. Donat, 48, was of a larger stature and strong physical built. Both were good speakers and recitors of verse without which justice to Becket’s character was impossible. Over and above that Speaight was a devout Roman Catholic with a public school, Oxford college and Liverpool Repertory background. He was initially put off by the passivity of Becket’s character and the scarce ‘theatrical opportunities’ of the play. But he gradually came to discover that ‘the initiatives were the initiatives of grace, and Becket’s business was obedience’.18 Tydeman rightly points out – ‘A less committed Christian than
Speaight might not have picked this up...’ ¹⁹ One noticed deep personal conviction and a worshipper’s devotion in the way he enacted this role though he could hardly convince himself of Becket as a man of flesh and blood. * Donat’s performance, *The Times*, 1 April 1953, reported, shone with ‘warm humanity’ and ‘ecclesiastical dignity’. Richard Pasco’s Becket of 1972 unfolded in a different angle altogether—Pasco’s flat face, staring eyes and hairshirt suggesting a person with a past of ‘mirth and sportfulness’. This was more of a worldly Becket aware of its temptations and vices. This, Tydeman affirms, ‘lent authority to the Tempters and made the battle to resist their blandishments more credible’. ²⁰ Pasco, more than Donat, as David Jones confirms, ‘managed to express far more tension and uncertainty before choosing the road to martyrdom’. ²¹ He was the one to add ‘flesh’ to Becket’s silhouette while in voice-acting too he superbly matched his predecessors. Michael Feast, the Becket of 1993 production at Stratford Swan was the least spiritual of the lot. The warmth and affection one noticed in Donat was missing in Feast. In the Christmas Sermon scene moreover he delivered the sermon with an overwhelming emotional intensity which Emrys Jones found ‘disconcerting’. This part of the performance she thought should be delivered “straight” with a ‘rational control and self-command’, in other words, with ‘restraint’. But it is worth recalling that Robert Speaight ‘had a strong instinct that Becket should show signs of emotion when he told his people . . . that he would probably never preach to them again’, ²² and even Robert Donat admitted ‘moments of personal emotion into his performance of the sermon’. ²³ Historically speaking, too, this was a point at which Becket’s control is recorded to have totally ‘broken down’.

* Robert Speaight - ‘there was the problem of giving concrete shape to a character which had been conceived, designedly, in the abstract. These bones were beautiful, but they needed the integument of flesh. I had to snatch at any clue which would suggest the man that Becket once had been, as well as the man he had become.’

In the character of Reilly, actors were supposed to tread two worlds at the same time. Alec Guinness performed the role twice – in 1949 and then again in 1968 with ‘comic authority’ and ‘sardonic humour’. Compared to his ‘imperial’ and ‘commanding’ demeanour, Rex Harrison, as per reviewers, was soft and charming, though in the consulting room scene in the second act he did impose ‘a kind of ascendancy’. Similar duality operated in the characterization of Celia Copplestone too. Margaret Leighton (28 years) very deftly brought out both the charm and saintliness of Celia whereas Irene Worth (36 years), in spite of her robustness and sincerity of feeling, failed ‘to suggest the vulnerability beneath the social poise which Leighton found.’

Eileen Atkins playing the role in 1968 was overwhelmingly praised by Frank Cox in *Plays and Players* (August 1968) for being ‘every inch Eliot’s “saint” without making spectators feel that she was less than a human being for all her exalted calling’.

This balancing of traits, this binding of naturalism with non-naturalism, is, basically, the signature of all Eliot protagonists. Tydeman points out that exaggeration of spiritual representation could lead to failure of convincing the audience ‘that you are a member of the same species as they;’ whereas too much adherence to common humanity could run the risk of bewildering the audience with the character’s esoteric bent and metaphysical flights. In language, in set design, costume and performance style therefore, the duality of experience – the dual levels of reality – came to complement the abstruse construct of the verbal mode. Brecht and Becket’s conviction of Reality was subjective; Eliot chose the objective mode.
Production of Eliot’s plays constitute an interesting story of successive experimentation with and modification of the means of stage communication. The study of the productions, the use of the structure of the theatre and the stage, of costume, light, music and decor, unfold an interesting field of enquiry. Production details related to three of Eliot’s most commercially and critically acclaimed plays, *Murder in the Cathedral*, *Family Reunion*, *Cocktail Party*, might be chosen for consideration. While the first performances of these plays are each a historical event, subsequent productions are marked by experimental directorial ventures or perceptive acting. Spread across several decades, they also capture audience receptivity over a significant stretch of time. Eliot had moved from non-naturalistic to naturalistic presentation but transcendentalism remained his constant purview. The double-motive showed itself not only through the symbolical-metaphorical use of verbal medium but also through the strategies in stage-craft.

*Murder in the Cathedral*, 1935, was performed by a group of amateur artistes except for Robert Speaight, a professional, as Thomas Becket, and E. Martin Browne as the director. Chorus was played by students of the Central School of Dramatic Art trained by Elsie Fogarty, an expert on the technique of choral speaking (also a trainer for the *Rock* chorus). Martin Browne defines the Chapter House as ‘a rectangular building of early fourteenth century, with arcading round the walls to provide a range of raised stalls for the monks and, on the east wall, more imposing ones, raised higher, for the prior and other officers’. The main inconvenience faced was its shallow stage 36 ft in width but only 9 ft. deep (reduced to this size in order to make sitting arrangements); this left ‘very little scope for movement from front to back’ and also made it ‘difficult for actors to pass each other when many are on stage’ and they had
to move from side to side. To negotiate, he arranged (a) a double flight of steps in the front and (b) two platforms in quarter-circle shape at the side front of the stage where the chorus could be positioned for most of the play.

The Temptation scene proved too crowded with eleven members of the chorus, three priests, four tempters and Becket himself. Browne made the tempters stand ‘at the foot of the steps, each going up in turn to confront Becket’ and later ‘retiring into one of the niches of the arcading backstage’\(^{28}\). They later swiftly departed through the audience out of the rear back door also to double as knights in the next scene. Apart from making good actors play double roles, this strategy also served to strike a parallel between false values offered to Becket in the twelfth century and the ones assured to the audience in the twentieth. It was also suggested that ‘the enemies without and the enemies within Becket’s mind are related’\(^{29}\).

What could be achieved with the Cathedral structure of the Chapter House, failed in the Mercury Theatre performance held in Nov. the same year by an all professional cast except for the student-ensemble as the chorus. The next major production was at Old Vic Theatre, London, by the Old Vic Company in 1953 with Robert Donat as Becket and Robert Helpmann as the Director. With their physical and temperamental differences, Donat and Speaight provided two different perceptions of Becket’s role, articulating perhaps many gaps and silences in the script that might have mystified the audience. A film version in the meantime was released in 1951 in which Eliot lent his voice to the Fourth Tempter. On Eliot’s suggestion the double-role of actors as tempters and knights was abandoned for the 1953 production. Martin Browne assumed* that it was probably Eliot’s changing perception during his voice-over as Fourth Tempter in the film version (1951) of the play, that prompted him to

this decision. In a letter dated 20 Sept. 1956, Eliot was still found to dither on this issue:

I am by no means now sure that it is not better to have the knights played by different actors from the tempters. I like to leave questions for the audience to resolve for themselves, and one question which is left for them if the knights and tempters are different actors, is whether the fourth tempter is an evil angel or possibly a good angel. After all, the fourth tempter is gradually leading Becket on to his sudden resolution and simplification of his difficulties. 30

Years after, in the 1972 production by Royal Shakespeare Company, the characters were doubled again. Becket was played by Richard Pasco and direction taken up by Terry Hands. The play, detached from its original ritual occasion and staged after many years, proved to be a runway success. Both the 1953 and 1972 productions suffered the lack of a natural medieval and ecclesiastical surrounding. In the Old Vic production, a medieval place of worship had to be created with semblance of columns, stonework, steps and raised platform; for the Aldwych production, 1972, ‘rough hessian and silver foil’* was used to construct a church space decked also with flagstones, one of these used as a pulpit for Becket too.

Emrys Jones, commenting** on the 1990 production of the play at Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, points out the vast difference in attitude and approach between actors and audience of 1935 and of 1993. It was now being enacted in a multi cultural, multi racial society of growing skepticism and faithlessness where there were more mosque going Muslims than church going Anglicans. Steven Pimlott, the director, had to aim at this mixed audience of a secular mindset. Earlier, in 1989, Frank Kermode had noted shifting priority in the modernization of *Murder in The

* William Tydeman, op. cit., p. 73.

Cathedral – ‘Generally speaking, the emphasis has shifted from martyrdom to agonized secular heroism’.*

Proposals for more religious and historical plays poured in after Murder in the Cathedral but Eliot was determined to move away from the period-piece play in favour of contemporary themes. This was, as he thought, the only way to impress verse, in its full dignity on modern sensibility so that the audience may find it not esoteric but integral to everyday life. Family Reunion was the next play.

Subtitled in the draft first as ‘A Melodrama’ and then as ‘Vernal equinox’ (to impress the pattern of seasonal cycle in the play) Family Reunion was premiered in Westminster Theatre London on 21 March 1939. Director E. Martin Browne played the role of Dr. Warburton while Michael Redgrave appeared as Harry, Helen Hayes as Amy, Henzie Raeburn (Browne’s wife) as Ivy, Catherine Lacy as Agatha, Ruth Lodge as Mary. The American premier with an all female cast took place on 8 June 1940 at Macmillan Hall, Well’s College, under direction of Robert Klein. Klein defined the play in his note to the programme as one ‘of our time . . . Eliot has attempted to represent that trend in our modern life which forces the imagination and the intelligence of the individual into the mould of mass belief, which crushes personal initiative and substitutes totalitarian action.’31 On 31 October 1946 the play was revived at Mercury Theatre with Martin Browne as director but Alan Wheatby playing Harry this time. In the post-war years of acute power cut and fuel shortage, performances were often carried out in candle light; materials for costume and set design were also in short supply. Stella Mary Pearce (set and costume designer for Rock and Murder too) recounts how she manipulated the extremely small (12’ X 18’) Mercury stage to resemble ‘a country mansion’:

In view of the eerie plot of the play, I felt the décor of the room should be dark, though not of course black . . . I was able to get enough dark blue scenic paint to cover the walls.

A large marble bust was the only item used ‘to suggest that the family was old and established’.

B.B.C. broadcast the play in 1951 while in 1960 Browne directed seven performances including a students’ production as a visiting faculty at New York’s Union Theological Seminary. In 1979, April 18, Michael Elliott directed the Royal Exchange Theatre Company production at Manchester with marked innovations in music and lighting.

In *The Cocktail Party*, the subtitle ‘A Comedy’ was subverted by issues of deep moral crises. Critics noting a consistent comic strain running through the play responded on varying levels. Helen Gardner noted that ‘In these last plays he (Eliot) deliberately wrote within the limits of what has been contemptuously called the “West End Play” . . . He used the picture-frame stage, with a conventional setting: the modern flat, the library, the consulting room, the terraces of an expensive rest-home. He made no use of Chorus, soliloquy or aside, and employed for his machines the telephone and the front-door bell’.

* Comments recorded in *T. S. Eliot’s Drama, A Research and Production Sourcebook* (op. cit.), by Randy Malamud, include:

G. W. Brandt – ‘The very title of the play is really a joke . . . the cocktail party . . . is never actually shown on stage . . . In purely theatrical terms, there is a good deal of comedy business, all of it of course in an appropriately quiet key: Julia’s well-timed irruptions and interruptions; Harcourt Reilly’s bursting into song; Edward’s unsuccessful culinary efforts’.

Also,

Celia’s death is ‘regarded not so much as a horrible event . . . but rather as a spiritual triumph . . . the comedy is not primarily a comedy of laughter but that of a ‘happy’ view of the universe, in which even tragedy falls into place in a higher conciliation of opposites’.

Ann P. Brady – ‘The world of comedy is the world of humility, where people do not fall, because they are already on the ground (humus) where they belong. It is a world of reality where one is free to celebrate the ordinary. To enter this world, one must relinquish the primacy of the self, the loss of which is often accomplished through a comedic ‘fall from eminence and experienced as humiliation, but eventually accepted as a descent to truth, to humility’.
E. Martin Browne tells** us that Eliot did intend an absolutely realistic setting for the play without any tinge of the experimental or the symbolic. Anthony Holland, the set designer, took ample care to portray a ‘simple naturalism’. Reviewer Desmond Shawe Taylor described it as ‘the usual stylish flat, with a white telephone, a Marie Laurencin.’

The ambience at its primary threshold was intended to be most innocuous. Later, for Confidential Clerk, Browne reacted by advising the set designer to allow ‘freedom to the imagination of the beholder’ by providing scope to ‘look through or around the rooms in which the action takes place’. This he thought would do justice to the poetic element in the play – something which went amiss in the totally enclosed rooms of Cocktail Party.

*The Cocktail Party* was put on stage for the first time on 22 Aug. 1949, at the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh at the Edinburgh International Festival. Among celebrated names assaying the roles were Sir Alec Guinness as Reilly, Irene Worth as Celia, Ursula Jeans as Lavinia, Robert Fleming as Edward Chamberlayne, and Cathleen Nesbitt as Julia Shuttlethwaite. The production directed by Martin Browne was subsequently presented at the Henry Miller Theatre, New York; the next production by Martin Browne again came up on 3 May 1950 at New Theatre, London; Rex Harrison played Reilly and Margaret Leighton, Celia. In 1968, the play was staged at the Chichester Festival Theatre with Sir Alec Guinness both as Director and Reilly and Eileen Atkins as Celia. Two decades later, John Dexter revived the play with the New Theatre Company on 28 July 1986 at London’s Phoenix Theatre. Barbara Everett notes that for the Dexter production, the setting was of ‘Twenties design of immense claustrophobic stridency, transforming to (Thirties) white, with bowls of lilies for the third-act finale.’

** E Martin Browne, op.cit., p. 232.
successfully managed to bring out Eliot’s suggested claim that a marriage saved from the brink of disaster is as vital as Celia’s selfless sacrifice; he did so ‘. . . by having Lavinia and Edward bathe their words in the warmth of demonstrative gestures . . . Lavinia’s very visible swelling belly bore out the fertility of marriage’.38

In tandem with words and gesture, costumes, music and light played a vital role in indicating the multiple planes of reality and suggesting unspoken nuances of traits and feelings. Outfits for Murder in the Cathedral were specially designed to match the spirit of the play and compensate for the cold colors of the cathedral. While working on it Stella Mary commented:

The only solution was to try to deaden the gentle brownish decoration on the natural stonework by using strong design for the costumes, and by not being too narrowly historically accurate in their design . . . Had the production been planned for another setting, I should have produced very different design’.39

The chorus was attired in robes of two shades of green separated by horizontal strands of red and blue intended to create a stained glass effect; it also effected a constant change of colour as the chorus moved from one side to another; the headclothes were designed in pale green too. The Tempters emerged in bright yellow, each wearing a symbolic item to denote the nature of temptation. The first wore a coronet fitted with a top hat suggesting the ‘gay man about town’; the second wore medals on his breast as credentials of his identity as a politician; the third, ‘a country lord’ with a kind of golf stick, wore heraldic checks. The fourth, dressed to resemble Becket, had ‘crowns and palms imprinted on his costume suggesting the tangible rewards of martyrdom’.40

The (1953) Old Vic costumes for the entire cast were plain and unremarkable while the 1972 Aldwych costumes wore a rough, coarse look much in keeping with the Brechtian trend.
The chorus of women in *Murder in the Cathedral* offered varied theatrical scope allowing both stylized and naturalistic strategies of dress and performance. Right from the beginning critics observed a basic dichotomy in their characterization. Their refined middle class speech could not be reconciled with their status as scrubbers and sweepers of Canterbury. On the chorus of the first production of the play, Robert Speaight noted – ‘They spoke beautifully, but they remained middle class young women from South Kensington. Nothing more remote from the medieval poor could have been imagined.’41 Charles Lewsen in *The Times* objected strongly to the rough and worn-out clothes of the chorus for the Aldwych performance 1972:

‘The scrubbers and sweepers of Canterbury’… are dressed in the kind of all purpose pauper’s weeds, carefully torn and assiduously stained,… acceptable… when they are agonizing in unison; but when the lines are broken up to encourage realistic delivery… they are made unbelievable by the clothes and by the women’s lack of employment…42

Martin Esslin, in *Plays and Players* October 1972, despised the peasant dress that jarred with the middle class accent of the seven members of the chorus:

Their voices are far too middle class, their intonations far too Third Programme (The BBC’s 'cultural' radio channel) to make them believable medieval paupers of Canterbury. Why, then, try to make them dress up and behave as though they were just that?43

The modernized rendition of the 1993 production perhaps offered an answer to this rebuke. The women appeared in overcoat and hat but took them off and put on aprons while scrubbing the floor after murder; before leaving, they dressed themselves in the hat-coat attire again.

The disparity between the speech-status and social-status of the chorus women however need not necessarily be repaired. Browne explains that their portrayal was never intended to be realistic. They represent the common humanity in general and convey the Christian message through loads of ritual behaviour. This in fact is their intended function in the play.
Dress-concept for the drawing room comedies was of a different perspective altogether—more ambiguous perhaps—something between naturalism and stylization. For *Family Reunion* 1946 for example, Stella Mary worked in terms of a definite colour scheme; men were clad in dark blue suits, dinner jackets and off white shirts; the women, she notes 'could not be dressed uniformly, for their individual characters were clearly defined and differentiated in the text. I therefore decided that each should wear a single colour suited to her character... Violet... hard and severe, I put into dark grey; Agatha, warm hearted and understanding, I dressed in a sort of orange tan; Ivy, the sentimental aunt, was in pale pink... the girl Mary, seemed to be right in palish blue'. She dressed the Eumenides initially as huge bird-like dummies in the colour of Amy, Agatha and Mary (who, she thought, haunted Harry), but after the London run scrapped them totally to supplement three dangling drops of crystal instead.° Pamela Sherek, costume designer for *Cocktail Party* Production 1949 invented ‘current, trendy, West End fashion’ to match the modern drawing room setting. Mary Curston’s review in the *Glasgow Harold* drew attention to the dual purpose of dress-symbolism, especially that of Julia:

Miss Cathleen Nesbitt... wearing a floral-patterned, fluttering dress and fussy hat, is first of all the dithering guest who provides the light relief; when she appears in a later scene

° Practical problems relating to the theatrical presentation of the Eumenides disturbed the author and the directors alike. The Eumenides were supposed to act as the ‘objective correlative’ of Harry’s guilt. Originally conceived in the first draft as appearing in an ‘Evening dress. Black tie’, and in the second ‘in travelling costume, with luggage, shawls’, they were later abandoned from the printed text and stage production. They were supposed to appear at the window-embrasure towards the back wall to be visible both to Harry and the audience. But as Harry stared at them turning his back to the audience, the expression on his visage went unnoticed. Eliot later decided to do away with them making them visible only to some of his characters and not to the audience. Katherine Worth in ‘Eliot and the Living Theatre’ provides an account of a students’ production in London (1966) which successfully utilized the Furies on stage. Created by variation of light in darkness, they appeared between Harry and the audience in towering black shapes suggesting black malignant forces as well as pointers upwards.
quietly dressed in a plain back frock, we have our first hint that
she has a dual role in the scheme of things.45

Later, the dark glasses accorded to Alex and Julia along with Reilly’s monocle in the
libation scene Act II, for the Chichester festival production, also contributed towards
building up ‘a very sinister, “other worldly” effect and assisted the impression that
here were creatures from another spiritual realm’.46

Musical evocation in the 1949 production was achieved by ‘a strong, sweet
and persuasive accompaniment from onstage and offstage pianos’.47 In the 1939
production of Family Reunion, choral passages were highlighted by lighting which
Martin Browne later thought was unnecessary. He preferred the chorus of uncle and
aunts to glide unobtrusively into their dual roles, ‘connoting naturalistically their
common emotions of fear and dread’∗.48 In the 1940 Harvard Dramatic Club
presentation Alan Sapp added his original music which, according to a note in the
programme ‘highlights and intensifies the choral passages and gives an undertone of
beauty to the lyrical poetry’.49 In the 1979 run of the play a background score of
supernatural effect was orchestrated by the accompaniment of bass viol, cello and
synthesizer. The lighting, as David Mayer reviews, consisted of ‘cold whites, grays,
chocolates and chalky yellows’ that validated ‘both the real and the long-dead but
intruding past’.50 In Murder in the Cathedral 1935, atmosphere was built up by a
liturgy sung by singers from St. Augustine’s theological college, from atop a gallery,
installed at the rear of the Chapter House. As Kenneth W. Pickering notes, ‘their
plainsong mingled with the action on stage’51 – weaving into the fabric of the play as
it were. In the 1993 version of the play, background music was of a different character
altogether. It was extremely subtle and unobtrusive; ‘some of it not much more than a

∗Lyndall Gordon, in Eliot’s New Life, expressed her displeasure at Browne’s misconception of Family
Reunion when ‘he praised the reality of the family and criticised non-realistic scenes’. Quoted,
R. Malamud, op.cit., p. 93.
long-drawn-out chord, in the Tempter’s episode specially, it served to create the
magic of something happening within Becket’s mind. Music also played during the
elaborate process of dressing up Becket in full vestment by the two priests. That way,
the change of clothes from shirt and trousers to the ceremonious robe symbolized his
transformation from a private man to a vestmented Archbishop.

Imaginative staging, facilitates the communication in Eliot’s plays. Director-
producers add dramatic vitality to a texture conceptual and abstract at the core. Verbal
poetry, supported, accentuated and supplemented by the visual language proves an
object of fuller and deeper appreciation.