

How do key elements of the **mise en scene** (settings, properties, lighting, sound, and costumes) contribute to the workability of the play?

CONCEPT: The playwright's setting (the environment of the play as the playwright describes it in the text or in stage directions) suggests the physical conditions within which an audience is to see the action, but they also suggest metaphysical conditions (abstract social or political ideas, psychological states, emotional and spiritual conditions) that sustain the action of the play and provide the frame of reference within which events in the play become meaningful. The playwright's setting, or a portion of it, a property, a costume, or a portion of a costume become **functional** when a simple part stands for a complex whole, when a concrete object or reference reminds us of a tangible but more remote and complex experience.

EXAMPLE. The old lock Klesch works on in Act I of Gorky's *The Lower Depths* is not only decorative, but also functional. Does it "just happen" that Klesch is a locksmith? Does the lock (not fully described, but an "old" lock could be rusty, full of dirt and debris, inoperative) have any significance? It could be a token of a literal world of closed doors and limited opportunities; it could be an emblem of Klesch's dispossession, those who own things, and therefore, amount to something, need locks and locksmiths to secure their possessions from thieves. The lock Klesch works on is worthless, but it is all he has upon which to vent his need to be busy and useful.

A functional element of the **mise en scene** stimulates the imagination and causes the audience to look through the surface appearance of things on stage to the ideas and attitudes contained in the stage action. In a sense, the most completely functional elements of the **mise en scene** are the most nearly transparent. Klesch's lock, Nastya's dog-eared novel, the 'cave-like cellar where the derelicts live, and the "back yard littered with rubbish and overgrown with weeds" amplify the idea of Gorky's *The Lower Depths*.

The play speaks to an astute reader through the medium of the tangible objects suggested by the playwright in stage directions, mentioned in the dialogue, or implied in the action. Moreover, the playwright has provided only a few suggestions. The producing team (actors, director, designers,

technicians) must sense the spirit of the play in these suggestions and find ways to make the **mise en scene** express the spirit of the play even more fluently.

Analysis Instructions:

- A. Examine the assigned script for each and every mention of scenic elements, lights, properties, sound, and costumes. List these references under separate headings for each act as a table.
- B. What mood or idea is projected by the leading element **S** of the mise en scene? Why? Be specific and clear.
- C. Suggest additions to the mise en scene that further amplify the idea of the play. Why? Be specific and clear.
- D. Relate your understanding of the mise en scene to the idea of the play. Pick the **most significant** element of the mise en scene, in your opinion, and explain in a short paragraph WHY and HOW it is significant. How might this element be used by the designers (set, costume, light, sound) as the visual part of the concept of the play?