

Spiegel im Spiegel: Interpreting and Reflecting on the Stage Designs of
Johan Engels with Special Reference to *Tristan und Isolde* (1985)

by

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This study largely relies on information obtained through personal interviews with the designer himself, colleagues and influential figures throughout his career. Interviews were conducted with overseas persons including David Pountney from Welsh National Opera, the designer Ralph Koltai and John Liddell from the Scottish Opera wardrobe.

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Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

This study is a historical overview of the life and work of the South African set and costume designer Johan Engels (1952-2014). A specific focus is given to the development and use of the mirror motif by looking at his set designs for *Tristan und Isolde* (1985) at the State Theatre in Pretoria, South Africa. It will be shown that Engels's use of the mirror motif developed through his exposure as an undergraduate student at the University of Pretoria, South Africa as well as internships in Europe that introduced him to the set designs of Josef Svoboda and Ralph Koltai. I will also explore his design *oeuvre* by looking at more recent endeavours in Wagnerian operas abroad.

Johan Engels is regarded as one of the most influential set and costume designers who shaped the radically changing South African theatre scene and abroad. Although most of Engels's career pivoted around international productions, I want to propose that he adopted his specific style during his early career in South Africa, with the pinnacle being his designs for the Richard Wagner opera *Tristan und Isolde*. I want to suggest that this early pinnacle in Engels's design in South Africa is mirrored in his work on the Wagnerian opera *Parsifal*, designed in 2014 and his final or *total work of art* as he called it (Engels, personal communication 2014) for *Der Ring des Nibelungen* to be produced in 2018, both for the Lyric Opera of Chicago in the United States of America.

According to Davis (2001:27), “designers, no less than other artists, may find that their lives inform their art”. This study seeks to ascertain Engels's understanding of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Schopenhauer's *Will and Idea* in relation to Engels's use of mirrors to reflect the cosmic space in which the two lovers in the opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, find themselves. I further speculate on what influence this specific production had on Engels's later career and how artists before his time as well as his peers in theatre influenced his design style and concepts.

This study is of particular importance since there has been no similar study on the career of Johan Engels and because the information pertaining to *Tristan und Isolde* (1985) and the designer's career at the State Theatre came from a dormant archive. It is imperative to document such information in the digital age; there is a great need for contextualising the history of South African theatre during and after Apartheid to show the pinnacle of its golden age, and to understand the era before the downfall of the Arts Councils, the loss of industry skills and how this changed the theatre we know today. The history of theatre in South Africa was written largely by a circle of theatre specialists like Temple Hauptfleisch from the University of Stellenbosch, Rinie Stead and Astrid Schwenke from the former Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), and Marisa Keuris from the University of South Africa (Unisa); however, the golden age of theatre in South Africa seems to be untouched by the new generation of academics. This is most probably because it is difficult to obtain information from a mostly inaccessible source of theatre history at the State Theatre and from the other old Arts Council archives, some of which have been destroyed. On my completion of this dissertation, Unisa entered into an agreement with the State Theatre to take over the old Performing Arts archives and to digitise this collection. This will create an opportunity for future scholars to access data in the former Performing Arts Council of Transvaal (PACT¹) archives and make it easily accessible to researchers

This study should contribute to a broader understanding and preservation of the performing arts history of South Africa. It sheds light on a small segment of its history that pertains to the career of Johan Engels as a champion of South African theatre design. This research will be supplemented by an exhibition of Engels's designs for *Tristan und Isolde* (1985) with costumes, props and photographs from the production and a catalogue containing more information on Engels's career in South Africa and on his designs for *Tristan und Isolde*.

¹ The Performing Arts Council of Transvaal was founded in 1963, according to Peskin (1990:1) "... as an essential part of South Africa's cultural development". PACT consisted of four different performance companies – Ballet, Drama, Opera and Music combined into one organisation.

1.2 Literature review

For this qualitative study, I studied a number of sources on different themes that influenced the course of my research and helped me to situate the designs for *Tristan und Isolde* (1985) in a theoretical framework. The predominant themes are A historical overview of theatre and Johan Engels; The history and psychology of the mirror; Schopenhauer's Will and Idea, and Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. I consulted Adolphe Appia's (1982) suggestions for the staging of Wagner's operas, artists influenced by Wagner and his work, as well as Lacan's *Mirror Stage*.

For the historical overview of theatre in South Africa, I accessed the following literature sources:

Pact Opera, The First Twenty-Five Years by Stanley Peskin is one of the most comprehensive studies on the history of this organisation and features a number of operas for which Engels designed. Besides giving the background of each production, Peskin (1990) discusses some of the programme notes, which in the case of *Tristan und Isolde* (1985) assisted a great deal in understanding the designer's concept and how it was manifested on the stage. Peskin is regarded as one of the most influential writers on the history of PACT, and therefore it is a source of repute.

The History of South African Theatre by Jill Fletcher (1994) is a seminal source in understanding the early stages of theatre in South Africa. The book focuses on a specific age in theatre only, and could thus not help build a bridge between the era of 1930 and the few decades thereafter. I found it troubling that there was not a single source providing a comprehensive history of South African theatre before the founding of the Performing Arts Councils. For this reason, I had to supplement this source with a few other sources to obtain a better overview of the relevant history.

Drama en Toneel in Suid-Afrika Part I and *Part II* by FCL Bosman are one of the most comprehensive sources that I used in conjunction with Fletcher's book. Academics acknowledge Bosman's two volumes as an important source describing the early years in South African theatre in detail.

Another reputable writer on the history of South African theatre is Ulrich Stark (1981), who brilliantly summarises the history of South African theatre leading to the State Theatre opening in 1981 in the *State Theatre Commemorative Brochure*. This summary made it easy to navigate through the different historical aspects and to identify the areas requiring further reading to situate Engels's career within the historical framework.

The Breytie Book edited by Temple Hauptfleisch (1985) is another source that I relied on for understanding the given period. This source consists of several contributions by respectable theatre personalities and researchers. There is a big gap in theatre history research regarding the history of the National Theatre Organisation (NTO); this organisation left a big legacy of skills to PACT. It was imperative to look into the organisation and its contribution to South African theatre. According to my knowledge *The Breytie Book* is the only source that offers a glimpse into this specific era and positions it in the history of theatre. It offers a section with the most comprehensive timeline of South African theatre history and world history combined; this helped me to position the history of South African theatre within the changing cultural landscape of South Africa.

The third edition of *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* edited by Hartnoll (1967) contains a brief history of theatre in South Africa as well as of the NTO and the first years of PACT. This dictionary is the only of its kind and offers comprehensive information on different theatre terms.

Other sources regarding the history of theatre that were studied to position the study but not included in the reading list are Andre Huguenet's *Applous: Die Kronieke van 'n Toneelspeler*; the history of the Hanekoms titled *Die Spel gaan voort* by Anna Minnaar-Vos; *Four Plays and an Introduction* edited by Temple Hauptfleisch and Ian Steadman. It is also important to mention that Hauptfleisch made what is possibly the most thorough of contributions to the history of South African theatre on the online platform ESAT, covering a broad spectrum of themes.

For the history of Engels's work, I relied mostly on archival material from the State Theatre Archives, and information from his agent's website Loesjesanders.com, as the

only documentation of his work was done by online critics and reviews. Engels's personal interviews helped me to complement the information found online with more detail. His relatives in Cape Town and in Pretoria provided me with ample information regarding his career, which helped me to situate him in a historical context.

The history and psychology of the mirror was a difficult topic to find adequate resources for, although one seminal source did make a big contribution to this study. Melchior Bonnet's book *The Mirror: a History* is a unique and comprehensive study on the history of the mirror, its place in art as well as its place in psychology. The content in Bonnet's book is well researched, and gave me insight into the very complex history of this reflective surface and several links to themes that I could further explore.

Schopenhauer's (1818) *The World as Will and Idea* forms a pivotal point in this study, as it provides the connection between Engels's use of the mirror and Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and outlines the inspiration for Wagner's conception of the opera. For this study, I will be using an English translation by RB Haldane (1909). Schopenhauer's theory is supported by a number of authors and adapted in their writings. One such author who is an important link between Schopenhauer and Wagner is Friedrich Nietzsche who dedicated his *Birth of a Tragedy* to Wagner. Nietzsche, like Wagner, shared many views with Schopenhauer that make this 1872 work an important source when discussing Schopenhauer's influence on Wagner. *The Birth of Tragedy: Or Hellenism and Pessimism* by Friedrich Nietzsche was translated by William Hausmann (1910) and helps to draw a parallel between Schopenhauer and Wagner and to link Schopenhauer to Engels's concept for *Tristan und Isolde* (1985).

I also included a section dedicated to *The Order of Things* (1971) and *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* (1984) by Foucault as a supplement to the use of the mirror as a motif and its influence on the *Tristan und Isolde* (1985) production materially and symbolically. This section further elaborated on utopias and also link with Schopenhauer's Phenomenon and Noumenon when looking at performance as an ephemeral phenomenon.

On studying the life of the composer Richard Wagner, I looked at a few sources to help situate him in history as one of the founding fathers of Modernism, studying the time that he lived and influences on his work with special reference to the Bayreuth Festival and his opera *Tristan und Isolde*. Such information required me to look at sources like *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (2000) by Modris Eksteins. The ballet *The Rite of Spring* by Igor Stravinsky changed theatre when it was staged in Paris in 1913. This revolutionary ballet is not the pivotal point of the book, but one of the catalysts in the birth of Modernism. Wagner is among the composers written about, and the book helps to position him in this time, providing great deal of detail about society, influences in his art as well as his writings and *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Wagner and the Art of the Theatre by Patrick Carnegy (2006) is a seminal source for the staging of Wagnerian opera and a one of a kind that provides insight into the different styles and adaptations of Wagner's proposed staging of Wagnerian productions. This book tells the comprehensive story of the Bayreuth Festival and the Wagner family's influence. As a supplement to this book, but by no means less informative, Evan Baker's *From the Score to the Stage: An illustrated History of Continental Opera Production and Staging* is one of the most compelling works on theatre production outlining how set design evolved over the years. It is an important source as it helps to situate Wagner's operas within his changing world, as well as at the pivot of the birth of Modernism.

The libretto of Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (1856) is an important aspect of this study, as it brings one closer to the composition itself and the musical drama embedded in this cosmic journey of Tristan and Isolde. The score that I obtained for this purpose was the one the director Michael Rennison used during rehearsals for the 1985 staging at the State Theatre, and came with drawings for all the placements and scene changes. This rare find greatly helped me to understand and write about certain moments and small scene changes in Engels's design concept, such as the arrival at Cornwall at the end of Act I and the solar eclipse at the end of Act III during the *Liebestod*. Together with this source, one of the most important documents pertaining to

this study is an original copy of Engels's concept for *Tristan und Isolde* as pitched to the Artistic Director at PACT Opera, Neels Hansen. This source explained Engels's full concept in detail, and proved to be a critical document in assisting with understanding the press pictures taken for the production.

Another source contextualising Wagner and modern theatre practices is *Performance Design*, edited by Dorita Hannah and Olav Harsløf (2008). Arnold Aronson (2008:35), draws a parallel between modern practices and the gaze in Wagner's operas that is an interesting and binding approach for Schopenhauer's influence on him and the relation of his work to the modern spectator of Engels's designs. I have used Aronson's notion to grasp Engels's use of the mirror in *Tristan und Isolde*. I consulted the *Dictionary of Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis* by Patrice Pavis (1998) for clarification of the psychology behind the gaze; this significant source explains the concept from the experience of the spectator as well as the actor on stage.

When looking at Wagner's influence on fine art and art movements during and after his life, Kevin Karnes' book *A Kingdom Not of This World: Wagner, the Arts and Utopian Visions in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (2013), is perhaps one of the most important sources to consult, since very few writers have touched on this topic. This book positions Wagner, his role in the Vienna Secession and provides ample detail on how he inspired the artists involved and the impact of his *Gesamtkunstwerk* on artists, musicians and architects. As a supplement to this source Hugo Shirley's article titled *Staging the Secession: the revolutionary career of Alfred Roller* in the journal *Opera* (2014:1360-1365), assisted a great deal in relating the artists of the Secession to theatre design; this article provides insight into how the early stages of Modernism evolved into the scenic design for theatre in the early 1900s.

1.3 Research methodology

This mini-dissertation utilised a qualitative research approach with documentary analysis being the focus of this study. Part of it relies on interviews conducted over time. An unplanned addition to the research methods of this study was physical observation

during an internship at the South African State Theatre (hereafter State Theatre), thus having access to the archives and building on a different level than during a standard scholarly visit.

The documentary analysis of *Tristan und Isolde's* (1985) set design by Johan Engels entailed a great deal of research in the State Theatre archives. This dormant archive contains information in the form of photographs and personal files of the designer, director, lighting designer and singers in this production of *Tristan und Isolde*. It also contains posters, programmes and negatives of Engels's production of the opera under discussion. The archive houses reviews and press clippings, offering an array of different interpretations of the production and its design.

By special agreement with the State Theatre, the contents of the personal files of Johan Engels were made available to me for this study, provided they were treated with care. These documents were of cardinal importance to this study as they contain the telex messages, telegrams, mail and personal conversations about the concepts of the director and designer; they reflect the challenges regarding the designs pre-and post-production. The documentary analysis of programmes provided me the opportunity to read the published version of the concepts discussed in the personal files of the director and designer and to contextualise them with the concept of the composer of the opera in question.

Historical photograph negatives provided some of the most important documentary evidence for this study, since an array of different quality of negative was available for scanning. The current danger in any dormant archive is the lack of digitisation of colour films from the 1960s to 2000, as the pigments fade at quite a rapid rate. Fortunately, for this study, *Tristan und Isolde* was one of the few productions where a large medium format film was used for some of the production photographs. These are in fine condition, and offered a very high quality view of the production itself and a clear view of the colour scheme, lighting and the set itself. Beta-format tapes were also found, although these had aged badly and after digitisation, proved to be of little help in this study, except for specific parts of scene changes and showing the singers on stage. Unfortunately, the South African Broadcasting Commission (SABC) archives proved to

be of no help in retrieving a professional recording of this production that was done for broadcasting, as a great part of the archive has been scrapped in recent years.

The interviews conducted for the writing of this paper brought me into contact with a number of people, each reflecting on a different aspect of the designer and the production in question. I had the opportunity to interview Johan Engels personally and in emails for two years before his passing in 2014. This gave me the opportunity to probe my research questions and obtain valuable information from the designer himself. In a video interview conducted with the designer on my last visit to his South African home in Johannesburg, he provided me with a personal view of his time designing for the State Theatre, the personal challenges involved, and how his designs for *Tristan und Isolde* took shape.

Interviews were conducted with Neels Hansen, who played such a critical role in the career of Engels and who gave the most detailed account of the production itself, of PACT and of the designs of Engels. As Hansen was based in Pretoria, frequent visits to him in an old age home led to a thorough account of *Tristan und Isolde* and in-depth information on PACT at the time of the State Theatre's inauguration. Hansen also passed away before this study was completed, about eleven days after Engels.

Interviews were also conducted with Engels's two sisters and his mother. More interviews were conducted with the lighting designer for the production, Nick Michaeletos, front of house manager of the State Theatre from 1981 to 2010; Kobus Lodewyck, and the head of wardrobe at the time of the production, Marina Williams. The information provided by these individuals was used to do a visual analysis of *Tristan und Isolde*, in particular the mirror motif.

It is important to touch briefly on the history of South African Theatre to position Engels within the time when *Tristan und Isolde* was staged; such an overview should facilitate speculation about how the skills transferred from generations of amateur players and touring companies from abroad may have influenced the design education and initial desire of Engels to design. The next section focuses on this history and provides a brief overview of some prominent designers who may have influenced Engels.

1.4 The importation of European Theatre models and their development in South Africa

1.4.1 Establishing of European theatre craft in the Cape of Good Hope

Before the founding of the four Arts Councils in the four provinces of South Africa in 1963, opera thrived in local touring amateur companies as well as touring companies from abroad. However, the first foundations of opera in South Africa were laid much earlier. The history of theatre in South Africa in general reflects the development of costume and scenic design that enables one to speculate on what influence 150 years of transferred skills might have had on Johan Engels and his subsequent designs for *Tristan und Isolde* (1985).

The first play to be performed in South Africa was presumably an early debut of *The Marriage of Figaro*, staged in the Soldiers' Barracks in Cape Town around 1780, five years prior to its actual premiere in France (Fletcher 1994:19-20). King Louis XVI of France sent the play to censors several times before it could be performed, which led to a subsequent delay in its public performance in France. This comedy by Pierre Beaumarchais forms the premise of the libretto of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* (1886), which was written by Lorenzo da Ponte. The Barracks had a rudimentary theatre in one of the empty rooms, and soon became home to the first theatre enthusiasts in South Africa, albeit it being theatre in its most modest form. Costumes and jewellery were borrowed from aristocratic women who were patrons of these early theatre ventures² (Fletcher 1994:20).

Lady Anne Barnard's (Figure 1) arrival in Cape Town in 1797 marked the coming of refined Western culture and entertainment to the South African shore (McDonald 1952:224). She was involved, together with Sir George Yonge, in the construction of the first purposefully built theatre in Cape Town, The African Theatre (Figure 2) in 1800 (Fletcher 1994:22). It was during the start of the nineteenth century that opera would

² The immediate momentum of success in this theatre venture was to be short-lived, as a scandal exposed soldiers who were selling borrowed plumes for liquor, causing the aristocracy to become sceptical and to withdraw some of their support for this venture (Fletcher 1994:20).

make its debut in South Africa with comic operas or *opera comique*³ by composers like Gossec, Grétry, Philidor and Méhul among the first to be performed (Fletcher 1994:31).



Figure 1. A portrait of Lady Anne Barnard (1800) (State Theatre Archives)

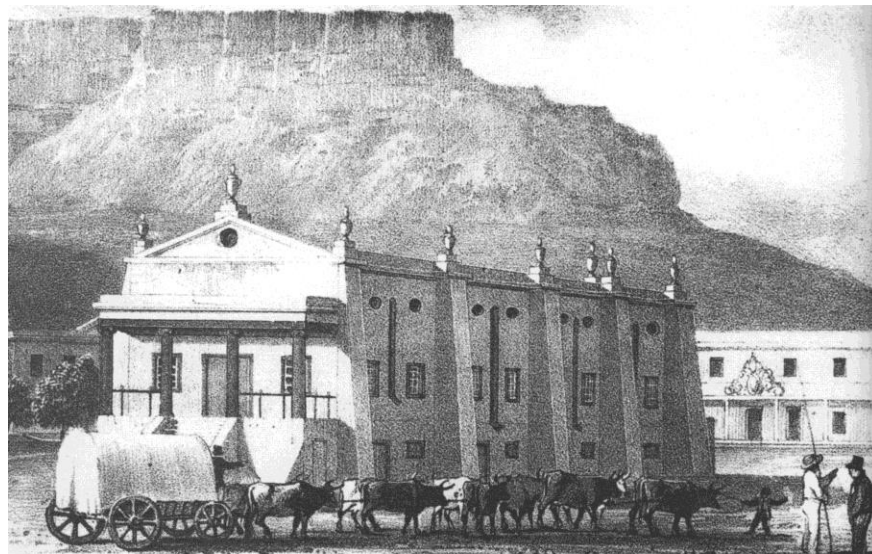


Figure 2. *The African Theatre*, HC Meillon, Cape Town (1802) (Fletcher 1994:26)

³ As a development at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Naples saw the addition of comic scenes before or after Acts in the form of *intermezzi*. by Neapolitan composers adapted even serious operas to the taste of the local people by adding these to Viennese operas. These were initially connected to the plot of the operas, but later became little independent pieces, where they started catching on and eventually inspired a specific comic opera genre known as *opéra-comique* in France (Hartnoll, 1957:587).

After a few successful years, the African Theatre was converted into a church and shortly after the first purposefully built opera houses were erected in South Africa. The Port Elizabeth Opera House and the Cape Town Opera House opened their doors to the public in 1893 with more diverse programmes, including opera, ballet and drama (Fletcher, 1994:120). The Cape Town Opera House was one of the first of the theatres to introduce scenic designers and lavish costumes to its stage. It was built in response to a fire that destroyed the Good Hope Exhibition Theatre on the harbour in February 1891. The exhibition theatre had a large collection of costumes as well as sets built for an opening night, when a fire destroyed everything, except a single costume that was worn by the apothecary in *Romeo and Juliet* (Fletcher 1994:118). The Cape Town Opera House⁴ (Figure 3) was inaugurated in 1893 and prospered under the influence of Leonard Rayne.

1.4.2 Early costume and scenic design

To understand the evolution of early costumes and decor in South Africa, one must keep in mind that small theatre companies in the early days acquired sets of costume and set pieces from abroad. Apart from limited costumier knowledge in the early days of South Africa, the acquisition of costumes from England or from touring companies from Australia meant that the skills and craft were slowly being transferred from shore to shore and theatre company to theatre company (Fletcher 1994:115). Even though they were pre-fabricated, these costumes were altered to fit the cast members, which would require a great deal of expertise. One can thus speculate that the craft of costumiers in Great Britain, Europe and Australia greatly influenced the craft of local theatre costume enthusiasts and future costumiers. Like sets of costumes, early theatres also owned repertoire production sets, also mainly acquired from abroad or built locally. One of the first prominent names to surface in this field was a scenic artist of much acclaim named

⁴ Mark Twain delivered lectures in this theatre in 1896.

Hedley Churchward (Fletcher 1994:22-23). Churchward (Figure 4) is one of the first designers mentioned in the annals of South Africa (Bosman 1980).



Figure 3. The newly built Cape Town Opera House (Fletcher 1994:119)



Figure 4. Hedley Churchward painting scenery in the Cape Town Opera House (Fletcher 1994:122)

The first notable costume and set designers, and scenic artists in South Africa started surfacing in the mid-1800s. This was also a time in world theatre history that principal singers were no longer given a small subsidy to arrange the making of their own costumes, which many times resulted in incongruous results (Baker 2013:98). This was a customary practice in theatre that did not change until the end of the nineteenth century (Baker 2013:97). Set designs for opera were usually copied from the original designs, and if not, they were heavily influenced by the original designer's work. This practice was also found in Richard Wagner's operas⁵, which did not change until after World War II (Baker 2013:209).

The first Wagnerian operas to be performed in South Africa were brought on tour by the Quinlan Opera Group in 1913 as part of the Wagner centenary festival. During this year *Die Walküre*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser* and *Der Meistersinger von Nuremberg* were performed. Olga Racster (1951:150) writes that this endeavour of bringing grand opera to South Africa was a venture so enormous that it was barely believed to be possible.

During the gold rush in the 1880s and the resulting boom in The Theatre Royal in Kimberley (Figure 5), amateur theatre groups started visiting Johannesburg. One of the pioneers bringing theatre (Figure 6) to this mining town was Luscombe Searelle (Fletcher 1994:113). The establishing of theatres set the tone for a new golden era in this town. In Pretoria, the Dutch actor and aristocrat, Paul de Groot met Stephanie Faure who taught him Afrikaans for his appearance in *Die Heks* by C. Louis Leipoldt (1925). *Die Heks* opened in the Opera House⁶ (Figure 7) in Pretoria on May 2, 1925; it was Faure's debut in playing opposite de Groot in this touring production that sold out 500 shows. De Groot's influence quickly spread to numerous other areas in amateur

⁵ The original designer for the first performances of *Tristan und Isolde* in 1865 was Angelo Quaglio.

⁶ The Opera House in Pretoria opened its doors on 29 February 1904 (Dunston 1975:242).

acting groups, drawing in several of the most renowned history makers of theatre in South Africa, like Wena Naude, Mathilde and Hendrik Hanekom, André Huguenet, Siegfried Mynhardt, James Norval, Lydia Lindeque, Willem van Zyl and Henri van Wyk (Stead 1975).

The Pretoria Opera House also introduced some of the first scenic designers to the Transvaal, with the artist Frans Oerder being among a few important artists to leave their mark on its stage in the early years of the theatre (Lodewyck 2016). An early example of such scenery is a painting in the State Theatre archives that was presented for the painting of a backdrop for the production *Ou Daniel* (1907) (Figure 8). The only remaining costume from a production at the Pretoria Opera House is archived at the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria (Lodewyck 2016). This specific dress (Figure 9) is from the production *Miss Hook of Holland* (1922) and is an important example of early theatre costumes in South Africa.



Figure 5. The Kimberley Players 1860 (Stark 1981)



Figure 6. A costume from the Searelle Collection that went on exhibition at the Africana Museum in Johannesburg in the early 1970s (Now Museum Africa). It dates back to the years 1893 - 1907 (Stead 1963:12)

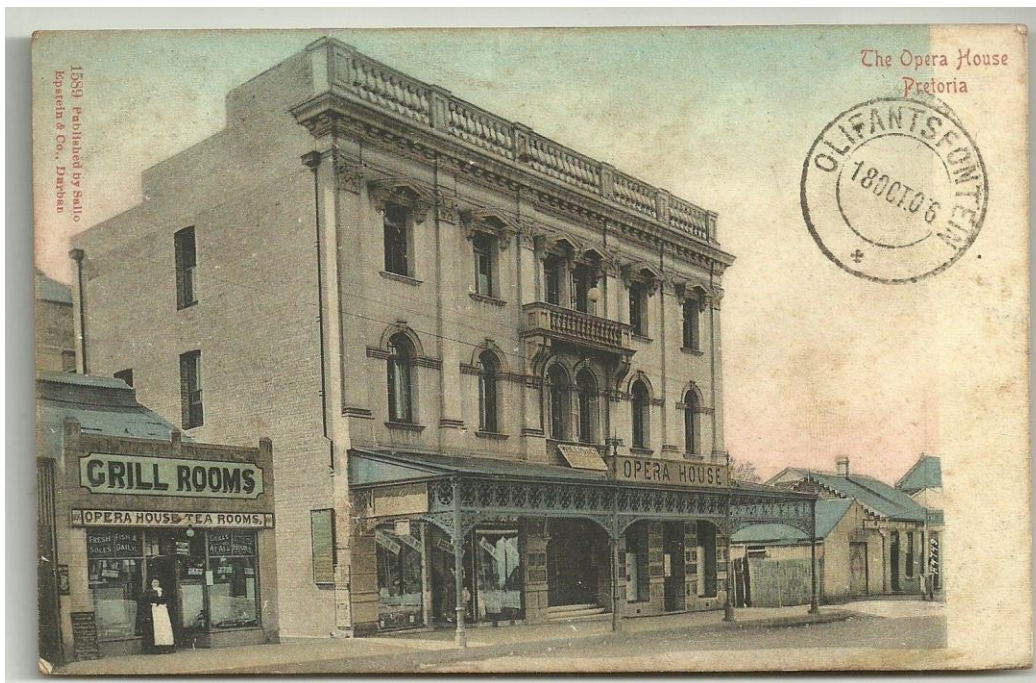


Figure 7. Postcard showing Pretoria Opera House (1906)



Figure 8. Original design for the scenic cloth for *Ou Daniel* by Frans Oerder (1907)
(State Theatre Archives)



Figure 9. Oldest known surviving costume from the amateur theatre days in the Transvaal. From the production *Miss Hook of Holland* (1922) at the Pretoria Opera House (Photograph by the author)

The years that followed de Groot's influence saw the great success of amateur groups, with lead characters that became household names in productions such as Die Hanekom Group's *Oom Paul* (1941) (Figure 12), André Huguenet's *Ampie* (1930) (Figure 10) and Wena Naude's *Oorskotjie*. The culmination point of these groups was two productions that convinced the government at the time to establish a state-funded theatre organisation, The NTO (Stead 1975). The Afrikaans translation of Ibsen's *Ghosts* (*Spoke*) and the first Afrikaans Shakespeare work *Hamlet* (Figure 13), both staged in 1947, became the force behind a unanimous movement to establish a national theatre. Local Dutch, Afrikaans and English touring groups of actors would become the major driving force behind the love of theatre in this relevantly young country, but only much later would there be an endeavour to start a company straddling both Afrikaans and English theatre (Stead 1975). When PPB Breytenbach⁷ founded the Krugersdorp Municipal Association for Drama and Opera in 1931, it encouraged the collaboration of both English and Afrikaans touring groups and became the first organisation in South Africa of its kind. The 1937 production of *The Pirates of Penzance* (Figure 11) is one of the memorable productions of this time.

Breytenbach also established the Federation of Amateur Theatrical Societies of South Africa⁸ (FATSSA) that brought amateur associates from all corners of the country together (Stead 1967:18). FATSSA created a network for all theatre professionals, including theatre designers, and during this time set and costume design were both discussed in detail in reviews and articles, resulting in more respect and appreciation of both crafts. All this groundwork through FATSSA by Breytenbach inspired his eventual

⁷ PPB Breytenbach is referred to as the doyen of South African Theatre by his contemporaries (Stead 1967:91). Breytenbach laid the foundations that would eventually form the cornerstone of each of the four arts councils through his constant selfless endeavors to promote theatre and creating quality theatre with well trained staff and seasoned actors and actresses. He was the father of the Krugersdorp Municipal Operatic and Dramatic Society, the National Theatre Organisation (NTO), Federation of Amateur Theatrical Societies of South Africa (FATSSA), one of the founding members of the South African Institute for Theatre Technology (SAITT). Most importantly for South African theatre research to be possible today, Breytenbach founded the Centre for South African Theatre Research (CESAT) in 1971 at the Human Sciences Research Centre (HSRC). Breytenbach was appointed Director of the Performing Arts Council of Transvaal (PACT) in 1963 (Stead 1967:18).

⁸ FATSSA, the Federation of Amateur Theatrical Societies of South Africa was established by PPB Breytenbach in 1938. The body represented 150 groups by 1950 with a membership of 15 000 and 500 productions a year (Stead 1967:91).

founding of the National Theatre Organisation⁹ (NTO), a body that sought every element of the theatrical experience and empowered all the individuals involved in creating national touring productions (Stead 1967:18). The NTO opened with the production of *Altyd My Liefste* (Figure 15) in 1948 and saw a prosperous era with other notable productions like *Candida* (Figure 16) in 1957; these productions marked the progress of South African set design; government funding propagated new and complex set designs.

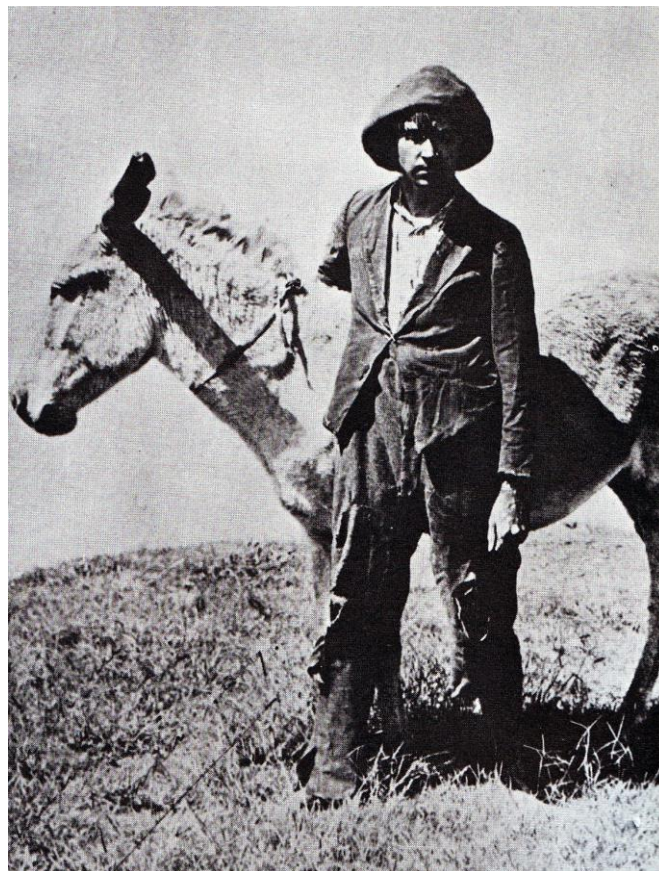


Figure 10. André Huguenet as *Ampie* and his donkey, *Ou Jakob* (1930) (State Theatre Archives)

⁹ The National Theatre Organisation was formed in 1947, with its first offices based in Krugersdorp. This organisation became the first formalised theatre organisation in South Africa in 1950 when the NTO became a permanent body (Stead 1967:91). The NTO was the first state funded body of its kind and after its disbandment in 1962 after an unpublished investigation by the *De Bruyn Committee*, the organisation, its staff and assets dissolved into the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal (PACT) (Stead 1985:66).



Figure 11. Cast of *The Pirates of Penzance*, presented by the Krugersdorp Municipal Dramatic and Operatic society (1937) (Stead 1967:4)



Figure 12. *Oom Paul's* cast (1941). From the left is Jacques Lochner, Irma de Plessis, Hendrik Hanekom, Hugo Stürm, Mathilde Hanekom, Tonus Ferreira (Minnaar-Vos 1969:69)



Figure 13. André Huguenet and Anna Neethling-Pohl in *Hamlet* (1947) (State Theatre Archives)

The NTO (Figure 14) was the first formal government-funded theatre organisation in South Africa; although its focus was mainly on drama, it set the tone for the future of all forms of the performing arts in South Africa. The NTO enjoyed a fruitful existence until its disbandment in 1962.



Figure 14. National Theatre organisation (NTO) logo (State Theatre Archives)



Figure 15. The cast of the first NTO production, *Altyd My Liefste* with General Jan Smuts. From left are Esmé Celliers, André Huguenet, Enone van den Bergh, PPB Breytenbach, Genl. Jan Smuts (Prime Minister), Truida Pohl (Director), Georgie Linder, Dan Welman, Ellie Swersky, Siegfried Mynhardt and Bob Courtney (1948) (State Theatre Archives)



Figure 16. The Set for *Candida* (1956) (State Theatre Archives)

During the time of the Performing Arts Council of Transvaal (PACT), there were still numerous travelling artists and small companies abounded. Pretoria, just like Johannesburg, was home to numerous theatres and concert halls, of which only a few would stand the test of time. All the cultural activities in Pretoria and Johannesburg were dispersed between different venues: The City Hall, the Breytenbach Theatre and Aula Theatre in Pretoria, and the Civic Theatre and Alexander Theatre (Old Reps Theatre) in Johannesburg in addition to several smaller venues (Van der Hoven 1985:83). After the

NTO dissolved into PACT, the Drama, Ballet and Opera companies centralised their performances in two major venues in Pretoria, which at that time were the Aula at the University of Pretoria for opera and ballet, and the Breytenbach Theatre in Sunnyside for drama. What would follow was the golden age of theatre in South Africa between 1947 and 1989 (Stark 1981).

PACT (Figure 17) was founded in 1963 as a non-profit cultural organisation encapsulating all the different forms of the performing arts (Van der Hoven 1985:83). This happened after years of amateur theatre in South Africa and the subsequent disbandment of the NTO, when the government decided that Performing Arts Councils should be created in the four major provinces in 1962: PACT in the Transvaal, PACOFS (Performing Arts Council of the Free State), NAPAC (Natal Performing Arts Council) and CAPAB (The Cape Performing Arts Council Board). The Arts Council boards answered to a central board of control, and each of the councils had to serve as a home for the four major forms of the performing arts: opera, ballet, drama and music. Between 1963 and the opening of the State Theatre in Pretoria in 1981, PACT presented 1 839 different productions with a total of 29 387 shows that were watched by 10 788 874 people (Stark 1981). PACT opened with the Afrikaans production *Die Gebreekte Kruik* in 1963 (Figure 18).



Figure 17. Performing Arts Council of Transvaal (PACT) logo (State Theatre Archives)



Figure 18. Cast of the first PACT production, *Die Gebreekte Kruik* (1963) (State Theatre Archives)

PACT's audiences grew exponentially during the 1960s, which gave the company international status, but also caused a few logistical headaches. The Aula at the University of Pretoria was constructed with very little wing space for actors to wait in before their entrances; this was where sets for different acts had to be stored. PACT used temporary tents behind the building to store scenery for different productions to be staged in a week (B. Lovegrove, personal communication 2015). For instance, *La Traviata* would follow a matinee performance of *Rigoletto* that same evening (Hansen, personal communication 2014). The crew had to strike these sets after the curtain fell on *Rigoletto*, and would manoeuvre the one set out of the very small scenery lift or the front doors of the theatre and set up the next one for production numerous times per week. Sets were constructed and costumes made at Kilnerton Park in Pretoria (Lovegrove, personal communication 2014). The venue was bought by PACT for this specific purpose, but the facilities were not ideal for much scenic construction and many

wardrobe facilities needed by the ever-growing companies. Designers at PACT learnt to deal with these constraints, and the sets for the Aula were all designed with its limitations in mind (Hansen, personal communication 2014).

One can argue that the set designer Raimond Schoop was the pivot during this era in the Aula (Figure 21); despite the limited space, Schoop still managed to create the illusion of epic space in his very modern approach to design. He was most probably the first designer to introduce theatrical modernism to the South African stage with his simplistic but striking designs. Some of Schoop's most striking work produced for PACT includes the set designs and costumes for the ballet *Raka* (1967) (Figure 19), the set for *Don Carlos* (1971), and for *La Forza Del Destino* (1976) (Figure 20).

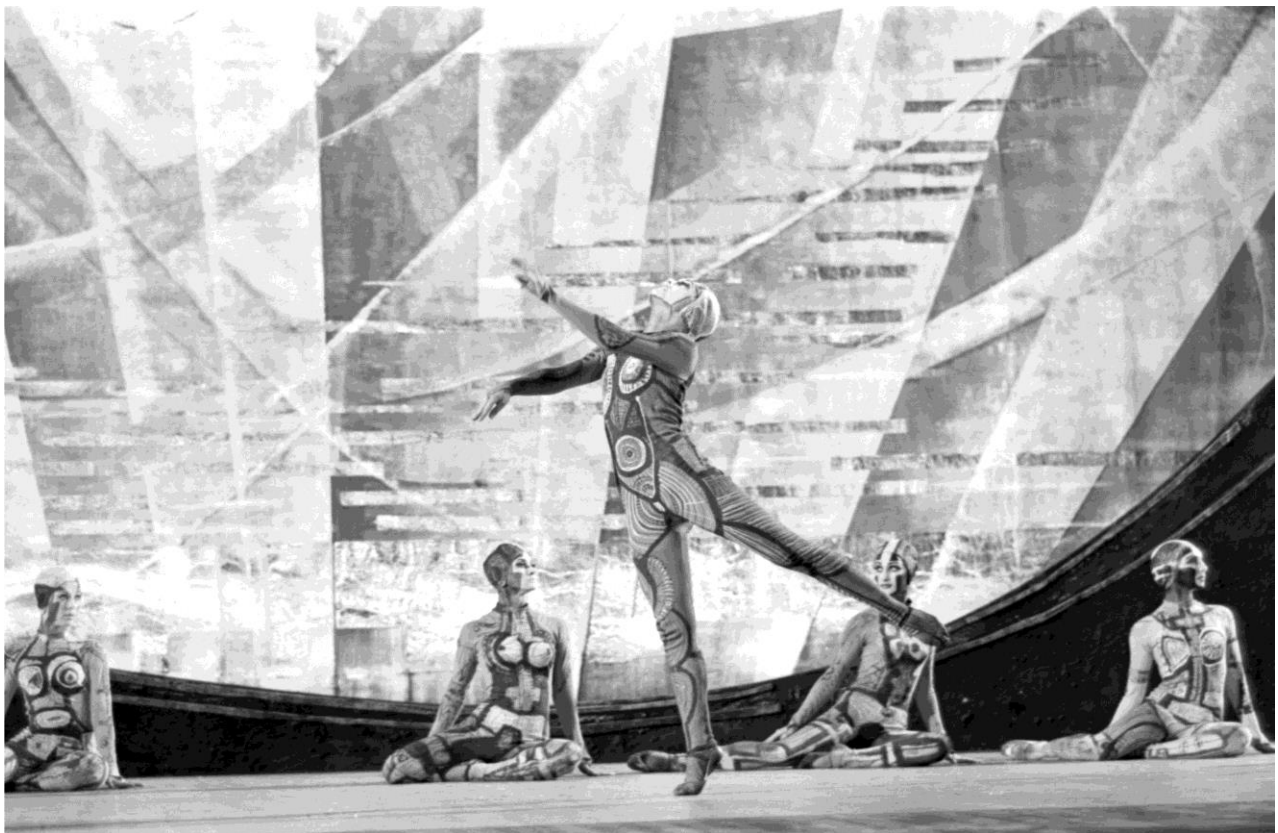


Figure 19. *Raka* (1967) (State Theatre Archives)



Figure 20. *La Forza del Destino* (1976) (State Theatre archives)

The Johannesburg Civic Theatre (Figure 22), which opened in 1962, served as a second home for the staging of opera and ballet in Johannesburg but even though it had bigger stage facilities at the time, the Aula's constraints affected what could be designed and transported to the Civic (Hansen, personal communication 2014). The Breytenbach Theatre served as the first home for PACT drama, but could not accommodate the flying of set pieces and had quite a modest and intimate stage and auditorium. PACT used the Alexander Theatre in Johannesburg for English productions. With tickets for dramas becoming such a commodity, it became clear that the Pretoria audiences had to be accommodated in a larger theatre with better patron facilities. Workshops, wardrobe and rehearsal rooms were scattered all over Pretoria and Johannesburg (Van der Hoven 1985:83-86).



Figure 21. The Aula at the University of Pretoria, which served as a home to PACT Opera and Ballet in the early years. Some of PACT's administration departments were based in the Aula in the early years (1968) (State Theatre Archives)



Figure 22. The Civic Theatre, which played host to PACT Opera and Ballet productions in Johannesburg (State Theatre Archives)

After much debate, the provincial government of Transvaal decided to create a home for PACT, where the construction of scenery, rehearsal space, wardrobe, orchestra, technical and patron facilities could all be housed under one roof. Mr FH Odendaal, the Administrator of the Transvaal at that time, shared the vision of building a prestigious state theatre (Figure 23) (Reynecke 1985:87).



Figure 23. *South African State Theatre Architectural Painting* by Peter Rodgers (1981) (State Theatre Archives)

In personal communication with Neels Hansen (2014) he said, “The décor of the theatre is very post-war. I love the restraint, whereby the whole focus is on the stage and nowhere else”.

Designed and engineered locally, but with plans based on German post-war theatres such as the Munich State Opera, the Theatre boasted four theatres, service departments featuring a wardrobe with shoemakers, wigmakers, textile designers, milliners and costume props (Lovegrove, personal communication 2014). The Theatre also boasted an in-house décor workshop with craftsmen and master carpenters in wood, a steel workshop, upholstery section, fibre glass and plastics section, scenic painting, a publicity department with designers, photographers, darkroom staff and a

whole printing department (Reynecke 1985:88). Sound studios, orchestra rehearsal rooms, opera, ballet and drama rehearsal rooms, 88 dressing rooms for 350 artists on three levels, administrative offices, a catering department, two restaurants and five private dining rooms were some of the amenities (Stark 1981). The State Theatre was the most advanced of its kind in the world when it was constructed, and remains one of the biggest theatre complexes internationally.

The inspiration for the design of the opera (Figure 24) and drama theatre was Richard Wagner's Bayreuth Festival Theatre or *Festspielhaus* (Figure 25), opened in 1876. The Bayreuth Festival Theatre was based on the Greek amphitheatre fitted with modern theatre technology (Figure 26) (Carnegy 2006). It thus required equally sufficient sightlines from all angles, a double proscenium to create a clear break between the audience and the stage and mask all technical equipment that patrons could involuntarily observe without spoiling the illusion. The most important innovation by Wagner in this theatre was the design of a sunken orchestra pit. His so-called invisible orchestra had to be heard, but not seen, thus adding to the mystical nature of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Carnegy 2006). This innovation was implemented in theatre plans from that time onwards, and played a key role in the construction of the State Theatre in Pretoria.

Another visible similarity at the State Theatre is the continental style seating, voiding the auditorium of aisles, and having two doors for every four rows on the sides. This helped with creating a much more intimate feel with the stage and uninterrupted sightlines. The needs of PACT for space are clearly visible in the design of a T-shaped stage with two side stages and a backstage joined to the stage of the opera and the drama. This space was used to store sets for different scenes and to give ample space for artists to wait for their cues (Stark 1981).



Figure 24. Opera theatre with the Danie de Jager fire screen design, South African State Theatre (1981)



Figure 25. Wagner's Bayreuth Festival Theatre with scenery from *Parsifal* on stage (1919)

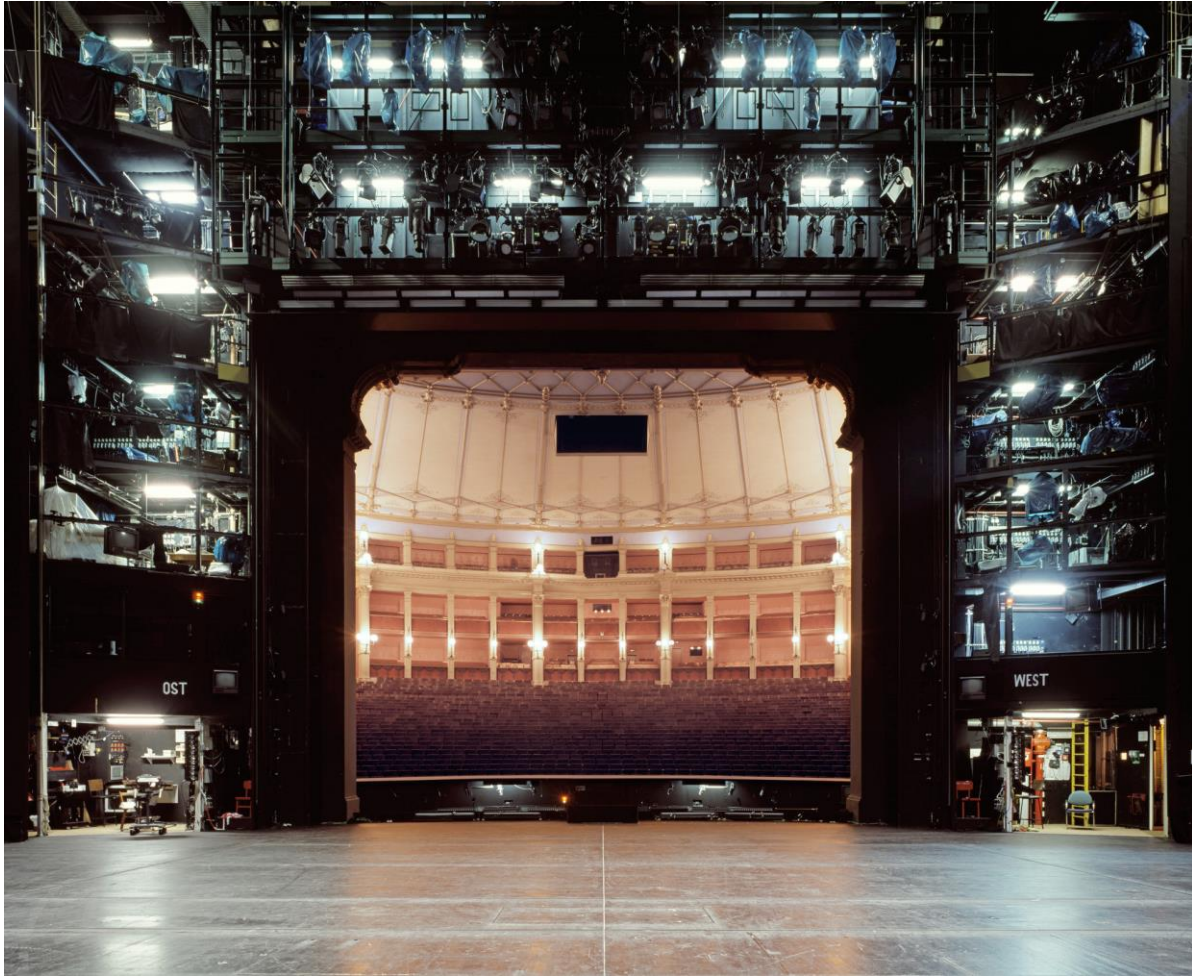


Figure 26. Bayreuth Festival Theatre showing the double proscenium and the auditorium from the stage, from *The Fourth Wall / Bühnenwerke 3* (2013)

These innovations made it possible to stage a production like *Tristan und Isolde* in 1985. The Aula stage imposed severe restrictions on the repertoire that could be performed there. A new era dawned in South African theatre with the newly built State Theatre. Productions could be staged on a larger scale than ever before, and productions like *Tristan und Isolde*, which had never been seen in the Transvaal, could be staged with no restraints, with every modern necessity that the theatre designers could use in their designs (Hansen, personal communication 2013).

Johan Engels received his training in Pretoria, against the backdrop of this new modern theatre complex built from 1970 to 1981. The facilities that he trained in, such as the Breytenbach Theatre and the Aula would have been limiting to his understanding of this

vast space, but Engels encountered the equivalent of the State Theatre in Europe during his time there. After 1981, Engels had the opportunity to design for a big space that was on every level as advanced as any modern theatre centre abroad. It was, however, Engels's training and experience abroad that would ultimately prepare him for the grand scale of his designs for *Tristan und Isolde*. Engels's understanding of how to appoint set design in such a big space without filling it from corner to corner was the greatest contributor to his designs being so effective, as they had to create a feeling of epic space, and not just fill the stage. The next chapter focuses on his training as a designer as well as the course of his career, to establish a connection with his ultimate conception of the designs for *Tristan und Isolde* after his local training and experience abroad.

Chapter 2

Johan Engels

To interpret the work of a versatile designer like Johan Engels (Figure 27), one must trace his development and taste for theatrical craft from where his training started. By the time of his death in 2014, Engels had become an established and sought-after designer for stage in Europe, Asia and the United States. This chapter focuses on the different experiences and his exposure to theatre that might have led to his success and the nature of his designs in the years before his work on *Tristan und Isolde* and after.



Figure 27. Johan Engels (Bob Martin 1985) (State Theatre Archives)

2.1 Inspiration and experience

One must explore Engels's upbringing to find the origin of his fascination with theatre design. An artist's childhood often guides the ebb and flow of his creativity and taste for a specialty. Johan Engels was born in April 1952 in Scottburgh on Natal's South Coast. His mother and sister recall how they first noticed his interest in the theatre when he was just a small boy, growing up in Durban and Port Natal (Burgess, personal communication 2013). Ms. Engels used to take her three children to the Alhambra Theatre in Durban regularly and noticed Engels's fascination with ballet at an early age after taking him to a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. Engels started drawing little figures with match stick-like legs with ballet shoes and soon began staging small puppet versions of productions with his sisters for their family on a handmade stage with curtains, and miniature sets with the characters in costume (Engels, personal communication 2013). He would meticulously design every costume and together with his two sisters would stage the whole play on this makeshift stage.

Throughout Engels's childhood, he became more absorbed in theatrical craft, and would spend all his pocket money to see productions (Engels, personal communication 2013). This fascination with theatre escalated when his family moved to Pretoria where his father was a member of the National Police service in the early 1970s. At this time, the Performing Arts Council of Transvaal (PACT) was in its golden years, and the opportunities for Engels to see excellent productions was now on his doorstep. While studying full-time at the University of Pretoria, Engels took on a part-time job as an usher at the Breytenbach Theatre (Figure 28) for PACT Drama. Here he met actors and actresses such as Wilna Snyman, Louis van Niekerk, Sandra Prinsloo, Tobie Cronje and Marius Weyers, to name but a few. For a student in the dramatic arts, a theatre like this would have offered a mine of possibilities, bringing Engels into close proximity with designers like Aubrey Couling, actors and influential people such as Anna Neethling-Pohl and of course, the young directors of PACT Drama, like Francois Swart.



Figure 28. The Breytenbach Theatre in 1975 (State Theatre Archives)

2.2 South African costume and set designers who influenced the work of Johan Engels

One of the early artistic directors of PACT Opera was Neels Hansen¹⁰ (Figure 29). Hansen had started his own career as a teacher in Nigel and was eventually approached to work at the University of Pretoria (UP) Drama Department after great success with the staging of school productions (Hansen, personal communication 2013). At UP, the Head of the Department of Drama¹¹, Geoff Cronje and staff member Anna-Neethling-Pohl tasked Hansen with the conversion of the old hall of Christian Brothers College into a small functional theatre, now known as the Masker, which

¹⁰ Neels Hansen was appointed as the Artistic Director of PACT in 1984, after being Assistant Art Director for two years and the former resident designer and resident director for PACT from 1974 to 1981 at the Aula, Pretoria. Hansen remained Artistic Director for the main part of Engels's career at PACT. The first opera Engels was contracted to design a set for at PACT was *The Barber of Seville*.

¹¹ The Department of Drama at the University of Pretoria opened in 1965 with the first Professor Geoff Cronje and a prominent research staff lead by FCL Bosman and acting staff lead by the actress Anna Neethling Pohl (Hansen 2014).

turned out to work effectively as a multi-purpose performance venue. Hansen eventually became involved in production meetings and arrangements with PACT opera, which used the Aula on campus for the staging of opera, and subsequently started his own career as a costume designer (Hansen, personal communication 2014). Hansen recalled the young Johan Engels turning up at his house one day and asking him how he could become a designer. Around 1972 Hansen decided to design an academic course that straddled the Fine Arts and Drama Departments at the University of Pretoria and that could accommodate prospective designers. This course provided the opportunity for students like Engels to specialise in an interdisciplinary field.

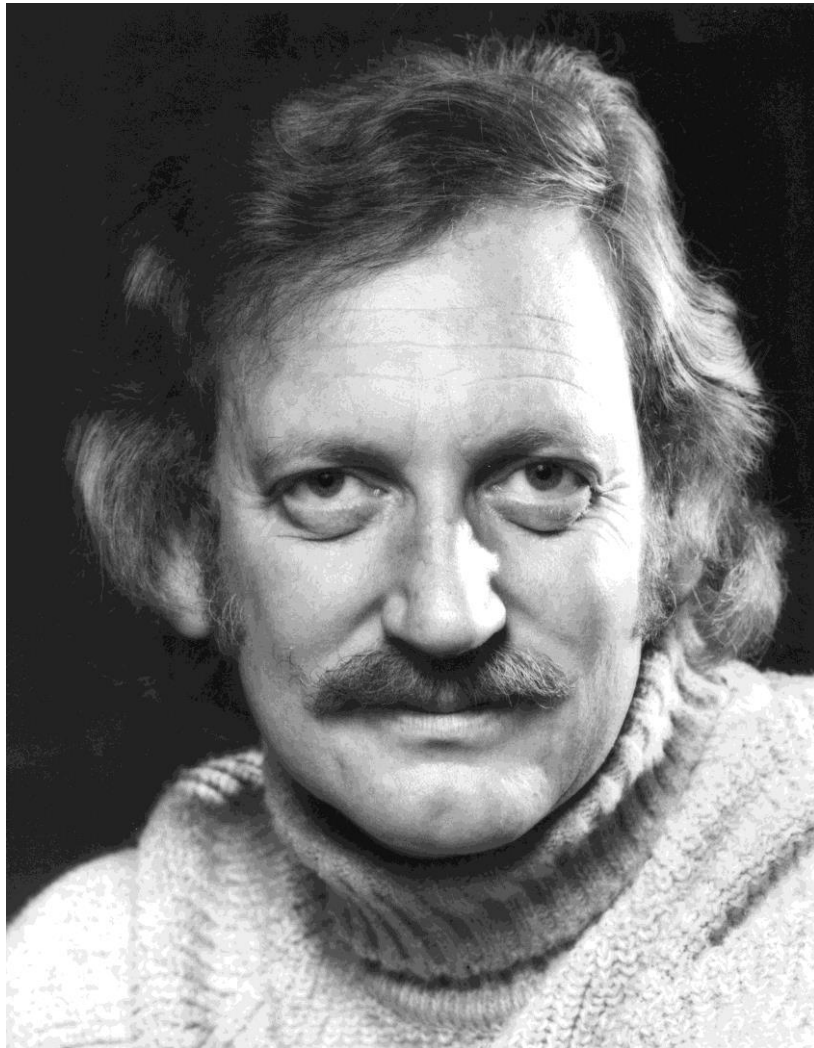


Figure 29. Neels Hansen (1981) Nan Melville (State Theatre Archives)

The Fine Arts students who participated in this interdisciplinary course were allowed to take subjects at the Drama Department, which also included practical classes. Hansen took it upon himself to introduce these students to the most influential designers at PACT at that time, such as Raimond Schoop¹² (Figure 30) and the famous South African costume designer Aubrey Couling¹³ (Figure 32). Couling was renowned for his painstaking historical accuracy, exquisite designs and knowledge of textiles and designs for costumes throughout the ages (Figure 33) while Schoop was known as the pioneer of Modernism on the South African theatre (Figure 31) (Hansen 2014).

Schoop's Modernism merits a greater reflection in conjunction with Couling's historical accuracy that may have influenced Engels' designs for *Tristan und Isolde*. The modernism of Schoop that formed the foundations of several PACT operas during the 1970's, might have had a big impact on Engels' own interpretation of Wagner's music dramas. By utilising these modernist principles, Engels could add visual tension to his design and thus create a set that is in service of the music, and not purely decorative and traditional. On the other hand, Couling's influence might have inspired a level of expert interpretation of Medieval costumes, simplified by modern elements, that tied in successfully enough to make this visual abstract world seem like it is tangible. I want to suggest that Engels utilised skill sets from both these designers, to create a visual tension emerging from two different design principles that lead to the ultimate success of his designs for *Tristan und Isolde*.

¹²Raymond Schoop is a German national who joined PACT in 1964 (Peskin 1990:91). Coming from the post-World War II background in Germany, he had a very different approach to design than his contemporaries at this South African opera company. This was owing to a mind shift in aesthetics, which started turning towards Modernism in theatre in a "rising form of a new era" (Eksteins 200:94). Schoop led the way to more conceptual and less cluttered design and was thus probably the first to introduce Modernism in South African theatre (Engels, personal communication 2014).

¹³ According to an interview with the venerable Neels Hansen (personal communication 2013), Aubrey Couling was one of the greatest influences on Johan Engels as a costume designer, as he was the first South African costume designer to do his designs with painstaking historical accuracy in detailed and easily translated drawings. Couling died after a short career at PACT in 1971 after tragically falling out of a PACT transport shuttle on his way from the airport to Kilnerton. He was 27 years old at the time.

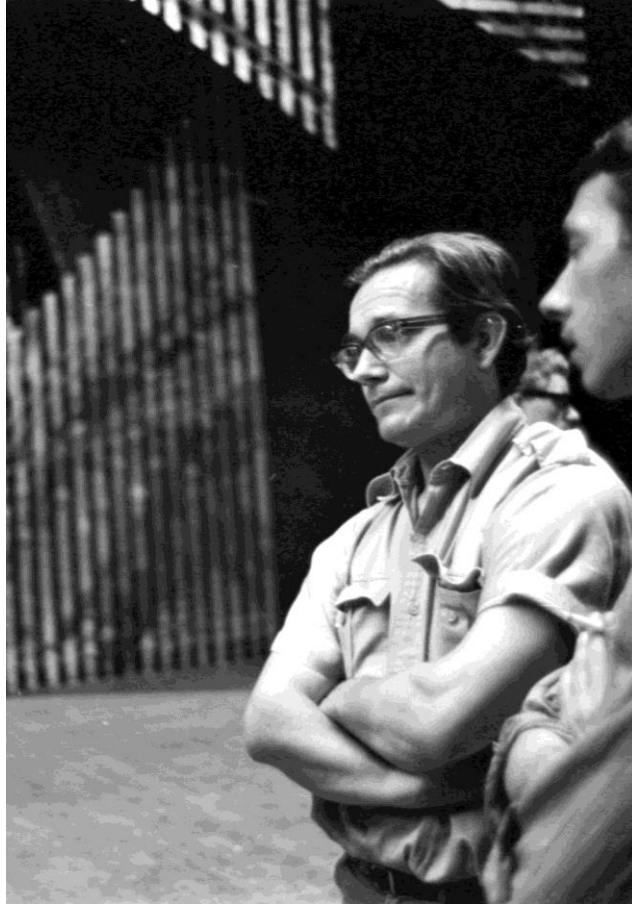


Figure 30. Raimond Schoop (1967) (State Theatre Archives)

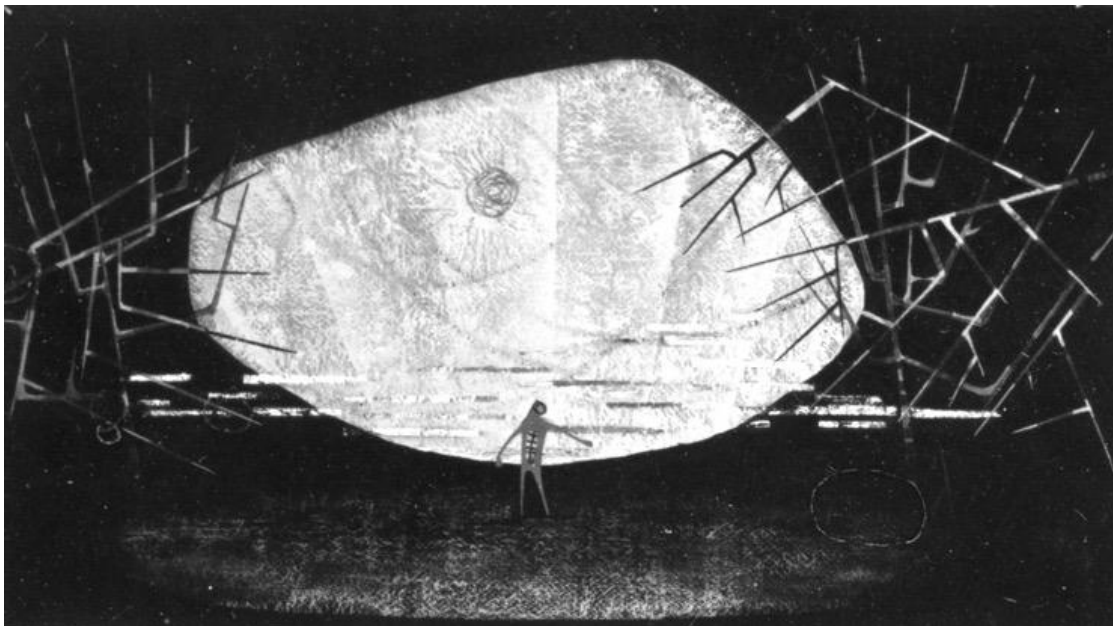


Figure 31. One of Raimond Schoop's designs for the ballet *Raka* (1967) (State Theatre Archives)



Figure 32. Aubrey Couling working on one of the *La Traviata* designs (1968) (State Theatre Archives)

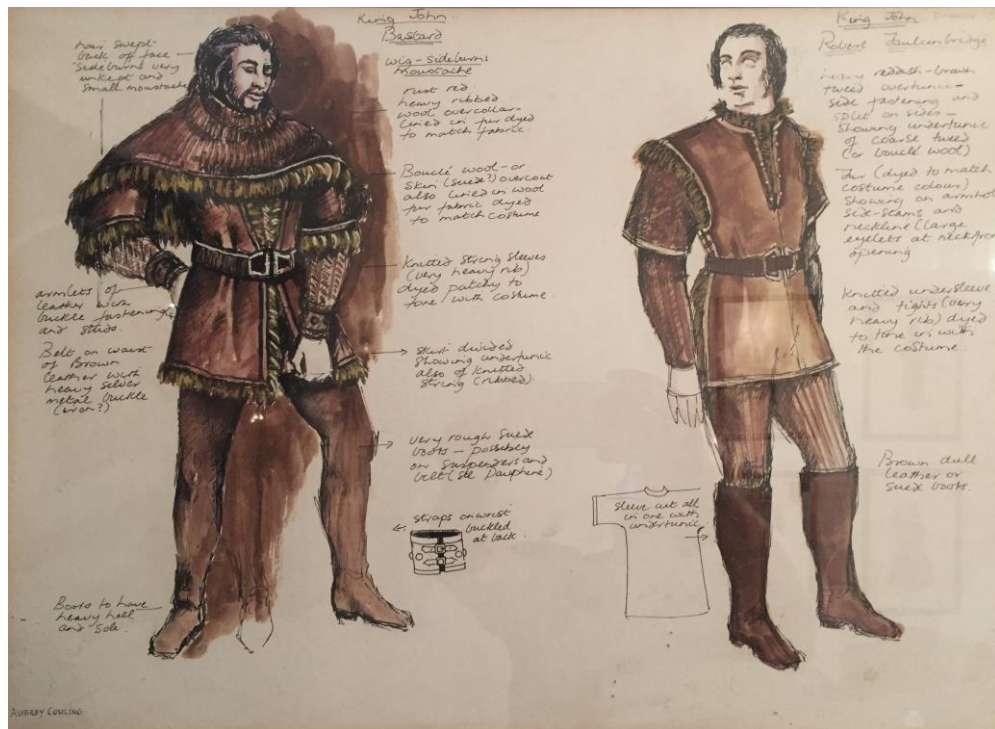


Figure 33. Aubrey Couling designs for *King John* (1969) (State Theatre Archives)

2.3 Engels's employment at PACT

Studying drama at the University of Pretoria enabled prospective theatre design students like Engels to learn more about the industry and to undertake projects associated with theatre design by getting involved in the action of real opera. At this time, the State Theatre was still under slow construction because of the Transvaal Administration's budget constraints. Therefore, the Aula on the University of Pretoria main campus together with the Civic Theatre in Johannesburg still hosted the majority of the PACT opera productions. The close proximity of and accessibility to the Aula gave these students the opportunity to observe professional productions. They had to work backstage and front of house, and by doing this, got a chance to experience production design in the making and on stage. It was during this time that Engels did a design project, which Neels Hansen presented to PACT to use as the set for the *Barber of Seville* in 1976. Hansen noticed Engels's skill and saw this project as a bridge to guide him to a possible future career at PACT opera. At the time that Engels conceived the designs for *Barber of Seville* (Figure 34), he was only 21 years old (Hansen, personal communication 2013).

The *Barber of Seville* set was a revolve set with three changes. Because of the limited wing space and the size of the Aula stage, designers had to design cleverly or make use of flats that were painted with specific scenic techniques, to make the set look three-dimensional. This set by Engels embodied both a three-dimensional quality and painting techniques to serve its purpose and was therefore well received (Hansen, personal communication 2013). At the time that Engels designed for this production, Anthony Farmer was one of the prominent figures at PACT Opera. Farmer was known for his realistic and traditional approach to design that was received well by the audiences at that time. One can also see Farmer's ingenuity reflected in this design by Engels, as Farmer inspired Engels's realism at this early stage in his career (Engels, personal communication 2014).



Figure 34. Fragments of Engels's *Barber of Seville* model Photograph by the author (2013)

In an interview published in the *Sunday Times Magazine* in 1983 Engels mentioned that in retrospect, he would have preferred not to be introduced to design so soon, as the production's design faced many problems (Silber 1983:18). He learned a great deal, nonetheless, but also dropped out of the Fine Arts course soon thereafter in his second year at the University of Pretoria to take up a job at PACT. According to Engels (personal communication 2014), he felt he would gain more experience from the industry than from pursuing an academic career.

2.4 Training and the mirror as a design motif

With numerous service departments, an opera company like PACT functioned by employing craftsmen specialising in a variety of theatre crafts to produce different things needed for productions. At the time when Engels wanted to work at PACT, the only available position, however, was that of textile printer; this involved the silk-screening, dyeing and preparation of fabric to suit the designer's demands (Hansen, personal communication 2013). Although Engels had no experience of textile printing

whatsoever, he was a keen learner and had to work his way up to be recognised by his peers at PACT. In Engels's (2014 personal communication) own words, this myriad of experiences are the key to becoming a great designer, as in the end they enable one to comprehend and respect the different skills associated with theatre design and contribute to a wider knowledge of design itself. This was evident as shortly after his appointment in the printing department, Engels was offered the position of PACT's resident designer. He had a fruitful career at PACT, lasting five years from 1975 until his studies in theatre abroad in 1980. In the first year at PACT, he designed for ten productions and had to keep up with the high demand of ballet, drama and opera.

Engels left South Africa at quite an early age in 1980 to study theatre design at numerous European theatres. During that time, he was a *hospitant*¹⁴ at the Deutsche Oper, Berlin; Glyndebourne Festival, England; Bayreuth Festspiele, Germany and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. One can probably single out Bayreuth as a major influence on Engels's subsequent fascination with Wagnerian opera (Sanders 2013).

One of the great inspirers of Johan Engels, Ralph Koltai, fueled his interest in Wagnerian opera and was a great influence on his designs and subsequently *Tristan und Isolde* (1985). Ralph Koltai,¹⁵ a famous British designer, got Engels to work as his assistant. Josef Svoboda instilled many modernist theatre ideas in Johan Engels that subsequently led to his fascination with mirrors. Koltai introduced the use of mirrors in his own designs in the early 1980s in the floors, walls and even ceilings (Engels, personal communication 2014). Koltai and Josef Svoboda both indulged in using this reflective material and these two designers reached their height in European theatre with others, such as Gunther Schneider-Siemssen¹⁶ (Engels, personal communication

¹⁴ A *hospitant* is a German word referring to a guest during theatre production rehearsals in the form of job shadowing. It is an unpaid position where the student can sit in on all discussions and rehearsals, but does not receive any remuneration (Engels, personal communication 2014).

¹⁵ Ralph Koltai is a scenographer who was born in Berlin and emigrated to England in 1936. He is known as one of the most influential theatre designers of the twentieth century and regarded himself as a conceptual theatre designer as opposed to just a scenic designer. Koltai had a few well-known designers train under him but never imposed his own style on his students, but just inspired them. He especially encouraged them to take a keen interest in materials (Burian 1983:221).

¹⁶ Günther Schneider Siemssen is known as the father of stage holography and for his theory of the stage as a cosmic space (Davids 2001:15).

2014). One can speculate that it is during this time that Engels saw productions designed by Koltai, that he developed a style that would evolve to a level where one can see the salient differences between his earlier, more traditional designs and his designs for *Tristan und Isolde*. Engels would later shadow Ralph Koltai for the production of *The Planets* (1990) for the Royal Ballet in London. Koltai (personal communication, 2015) described him as a consummate artist with a boundless range of abilities.

Although Engels was studying abroad at this time, PACT Opera still contracted him to design for a few operas. Designers would submit work to the director, and then subsequently to the Artistic Director, who would liaise with the designer and director via mail, until the final presentation of the designs would take place to the full audience of the production team, craftsmen and singers. During his time abroad, travelling between opera houses, Engels designed numerous South African operas for PACT Opera, including *Andrea Chenier* in 1984, *Tristan und Isolde* in 1985, costumes for Mimi Coertse in the 1986 restaging of *La Traviata*, costumes for Janice Yoes for *Salome* and *L'Elisir d'amore* in 1987, *Elektra* in 1988 and *Carmen* for the South African Performing Arts Councils (SAPAC) in 1988. He also designed costumes and sets for ballets like *Swan Lake* in 1983, the *Nutcracker* in 1984, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cinderella* in 1986 for PACT Ballet, as well as numerous drama productions such as *Macbeth*¹⁷ in 1984) for PACT Drama.

By 1988 Engels was well established in British theatres such as The Royal Exchange in Manchester, where he designed for *Hay Fever* in 1985. By the time Engels designed the costumes and sets for PACT's *Tristan und Isolde* in 1985, he had already shadowed master scenographers such as Koltai and personally saw the staging of Schneider-Siemssen's *Tristan und Isolde* at the Munich opera (Engels, personal communication 2014). Following the production of *Tristan und Isolde*, he designed *Aida* in 1986 for

¹⁷ Johan Engels designed the costumes for *Macbeth*, the drama, that he incorporated into the 1985 production of *Tristan und Isolde*. These costumes were used in Act I for the ladies of the permanent chorus who appeared on stage at the end of Act 1 as the ship arrives in Cornwall (Engels, personal communication 2014).

Covent Garden, which marked his debut in opera in the Royal Theatre (Sanders 2013:1).

Engels returned to South Africa on different occasions between 1986 and 1988 to work with Janice Honeyman on productions for the Market Theatre in Johannesburg. Janice Honeyman is a South African director acclaimed for directing musicals and pantomimes. As a contemporary of Engels, Honeyman started working for PACT Drama at a very young age. From here, she directed small stage productions and later collaborated with designers like Engels on productions at the Market Theatre. The Market Theatre was an independent theatre that was not subsidised by the government and was therefore free of the bureaucracy that Engels loathed in the big South African theatre companies (Engels, personal communication 2014). Here he and Honeyman worked with people such as Robert Whitehead and Janet Suzman (Sanders 2013). Engels (personal communication 2014) mentioned in an interview that he was torn between which theatre he had learnt the most from – PACT and the State Theatre with its monstrous budgets, or the Market Theatre and its meager budgets where they had to make do with limited means and sometimes the most creatively recycled sets.

In 1986 Engels settled in the United Kingdom to work with the Royal Shakespeare Company, where he designed for productions such as *A Dream of People* and *The Bed Before Yesterday* in 1989. Gradually, Engels started designing for German, Swiss, and Austrian theatres. Moreover, he designed the costumes for Sarah Brightman for the *One Night in Eden* world tours of 1999. After working in the United Kingdom, Engels was involved in numerous productions and designed for productions in major opera houses. Countries that he worked in as designer include the United Kingdom, Austria, Switzerland, Greece, Slovenia, Israel, Poland, Russia, France, Sweden, New Zealand and the United States of America (Sanders 2013).

After a drastic cut in subsidies after 1994, the South African State Theatre no longer had the resources to allocate big budgets and hire designers from abroad. This in turn meant that most productions after 1994 were recycled from old productions, or merely

re-staging of older productions. The State Theatre subsequently faced a challenging decade in the 1990s, followed by the news of a large investment by the State Theatre board in a pyramid scheme that failed. This was the final nail in the coffin of the State Theatre, which was subsequently closed by the government in 2000, causing a rupture in the South African theatre industry. Roughly 650 people were retrenched, most of whom were specialists in specific theatre fields, causing a great loss of skills and an exodus of some of the great designers, costumiers and craftsmen from the industry. The tidal waves caused by this event still influence the industry today, as more than a hundred years of skills have been lost (Lovegrove, personal communication 2015). After the closing of the State Theatre, and its subsequent re-opening in 2001, Engels returned to South Africa for *Showboat* at Artscape in Cape Town in 2005, *Fledermaus* at Artscape in 2004, and the *Boys in the Photograph* for the Joburg Civic Theatre in Johannesburg in 2010. The latter production received much acclaim locally as it was the first production in years that challenged the technical staff of the Joburg Civic Theatre with a complex set that made use of all the major stage equipment on the Mandela Theatre stage (Sanders 2013). The latest of Engels's designs for a production in South Africa was for *West Side Story*. This production's planning was still under way at the time of his passing, although he had nearly finished all the set designs.

Engels's success as a designer is marked by an important moment in his career that he mentioned in an interview (2014). Engels's designs for *The Passenger* for the Polish National opera in Warsaw was according to him his most emotional encounter with any opera production during his years as a designer. Engels's painstaking attachment to the authenticity of this production's design was met by tears as he had to present the model for the production to the Auschwitz survivor Zofia Posmysz (Figure 35) who wrote the book that the opera is based on. *The Passenger* received international acclaim after it premiered at the Polish National Opera in Warsaw (2010), from where it transferred to Bregenz, London, New York, Chicago, Tel Aviv, Copenhagen and Houston Opera in 2014, based on Engels's designs (Coetzee Klingler 2012).



Figure 35. Johan Engels with Zofia Posmysz at the model of *The Passenger*,¹⁸ (Coetzee Klingler 2010)

In 2013 Engels was given the opportunity to work on another Wagner opera (Sanders 2013). The Lyric Opera of Chicago approached him to design both the costumes and sets for *Parsifal* (See Figure 36 and 37). The opera was exceptionally well-received by the public and management of the Chicago Lyric Theatre, and subsequently Engels was approached to design the whole of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* that is to be staged at the Lyric Opera from 2018. Engels mentioned that this would be the zenith of his career and that he had always wanted to end his career with a Wagner production (Engels, personal communication 2014). A week after he finished the designs for the *Ring*, Johan Engels passed away during the night of 6 November 2014, 11 days before Neels Hansen, his mentor at PACT.

¹⁸ In 2010 Engels designed the sets and costumes for a newly staged opera in Bregenz Festspiele in Austria. The music was composed by Mieczysław Weinberg and it was originally scheduled to be performed by the Bolshoi in Russia in 1968, but was cancelled. Alexander Medvedev wrote the new libretto entitled *Der Passagieren* (*The Passenger*) based on the Polish radio play and novel, *The Passenger*, which was written by concentration camp survivor Zofia Posmysz. This revolutionary opera had numerous ethical and social challenges, as the story was set in Auschwitz by Zofia Posmysz who was in the concentration camp as a child (Coetzee Klingler 2012).



Figure 36. Scene from *Parsifal*, 2013 Lyric Opera of Chicago (Photograph by Dan Rest)



Figure 37. Costume design for Amfortas in *Parsifal* by Engels (2013)

2.5 Experience in scenographic¹⁹ trends in German opera

Ralph Koltai was a notable figure in Engels's career as he inspired his fascination with using mirrors to the advantage of scenic techniques at the time that he designed *Tristan und Isolde* in 1985. Engels still implemented a few design methods in his late work that he learned from Koltai, namely the use of a found object that is placed inside the model before any sketches are made. This method, according to Engels (personal communication 2014), is a much more organic way of designing. This abstract form breaks the constraints of the space, as the space becomes immersed in the presence of this object (Engels, personal communication 2014). Engels learned something specific from Koltai that he made use of in the designs for *Tristan und Isolde*. Usually when a cyclorama²⁰ meets the stage, one is confronted with a line that it creates on the horizon. Engels (2014, personal communication) was not particularly fond of this line as according to him, it intruded on the magic that is created on the stage by reminding the audience that the space has been fabricated. For *Tristan und Isolde* Engels had reflective material placed where the cyclorama met the stage, which blended into the rest of the floor cloth by the use of matt spray paint; this resulted in a mild reflection of the cyclorama that visually extended it into the stage to create the illusion that the space was infinite (Engels, personal communication 2014).

The director Götz Friedrich and designer Günther Schneider-Siemssen worked in collaboration on contemporary conceptual musical stage dramas. Friedrich wanted to stage productions encapsulating the musical masterpiece and its timelessness, without pinning it to a specific historical context (Carnegy 2006:348). Günther Schneider-Siemssen's name is synonymous with Wagnerian drama as he worked extensively with some of the greatest opera production teams and with the conductor Herbert von Karajan (Davis 2001:19). Von Karajan conducted and directed some of the most

¹⁹*Scenographer* is a British term for a stage designer, coined in the 1950s after the ambitious imprint that Josef Svoboda made on theatre design. Nowadays it is a common term, especially in British theatre (Davis 2001:173).

²⁰ A cyclorama is usually a white stretched cloth from the fly tower to the stage and is a versatile backdrop that can be transformed by lighting or projections (Davis 2001:170).

noteworthy productions of Wagner operas and especially *Tristan und Isolde* in 1972 that one can speculate inspired Engels's designs (Engels, personal communication 2014). Engels mentioned how this production at the 1972 Salzburg festival (See Figure 38) inspired much of his and Michael Rennison's concept for the South African production. Especially Schneider-Siemssen's cosmic space made an impression on the designer and director, and it was something they wanted to experiment with in South Africa, which had not seen a production of this kind up until that time (Engels, personal communication 2014). CAPAB Opera in Cape Town contracted Siemssen to design *Tristan und Isolde* for them in 1983 where he again used this galactic space in bright reds and greens (Eichbaum 1985:96). By intertwining this cosmic space with the *Noumenon* and *Phenomenon*²¹ (See Chapter 3) already present in the composer's concept for *Tristan und Isolde*, Engels's designs would transport the audience from this world into that of the two characters and the world they experience through their own transfiguration.



Figure 38. The iconic design for *Tristan und Isolde* Act I by Gunther Schneider-Siemssen for the Salzburg Festival (1972)

Engels had ample access to the scenographical tools he needed to design for Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* during his time studying at theatres and learning about European theatrical trends and concepts. His contact with great German scenographers like

²¹ The *Noumenon* according to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (2011:979) is tangible, and is distinctly known through the senses by its phenomenal attributes (Stevenson & Waite 2011:979). A *Phenomenon* is the object of a person's perception (Stevenson & Waite 2011:1076).

Schneider-Siemssen enriched Engels's knowledge of design for the psychological stage drama that eventually led to Pact Opera approaching him to do the designs for *Tristan und Isolde* (Hansen, personal communication2014), which is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*

Known as the piece of music signaling the birth of Modernism in opera, *Tristan und Isolde* is one of the most complex and symbolically agglomerated operas in the opera genre (Boyden 1997:227). This chapter gives a brief overview of Wagnerian opera in South Africa, Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* and how it influenced theatre in general. I also discuss the subsequent influence of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* on the 1985 staging of *Tristan und Isolde* and speculate how it influenced the use of mirrors to convey Wagner's interpretation of the *Noumenon and Phenomenon*.

According to Eksteins (200:1), "Venice with its mirrors and mirages, is where Richard Wagner found inspiration for his opera *Tristan und Isolde*, that tortured celebration of life, love, and death, and where he died in 1883 ...". Wagner's music transformed the stagecraft of opera while his musical intervention through the composition of *Tristan und Isolde* pushed Romanticism to the brink of dissolution, according to Boyden (1997). It is music of absolute longing that is unresolved until the final chord at the end of Act III. With the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as his driving force (Boyden 1997:227), Wagner sought a project through which poetry, music, art and drama could be synthesised to serve as colours to paint every detail of the instrumentation with a view to achieving the most dramatic outcome. Richard Wagner, together with Arnold Schoenberg, forms the pivotal point in music history at the turn of Romanticism after the middle of the nineteenth century. Wagner started heading in this direction with his succession of musical dramas, starting with *Der Fliegende Holländer* (1843), shortly after followed by *Tannhäuser* (1845), *Lohengrin* (1848), and culminating in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1854-1874).

Wagner composed and wrote the libretto for *Tristan und Isolde* (1859) utilising the confluence of three big influences in his life: reading Schopenhauer's master work, *The world as Will and Representation* in Autumn 1954, Gottfried von Strassburg's medieval poem, *Tristan*, and his affair with the wife of one of his patrons, Mathilde Wesendonck (Boyden 1997:246). This affair started in the summer of 1854, during which time

Wagner withdrew from his work on the *Ring* and *Siegfried*, and started to work on a project rooted in Schopenhauer's notion of self-abnegation and the suppression of the Will. This however, turned into a love song "in which death is transformed into an experience of orgasmic transcendence" (Boyden 1997:246). This love song would resonate in the form of a composition to accompany one of his lover's five poems, called *Träume*.²² This *Lied* inspired the composition of *Tristan und Isolde*, and in particular the love duet in Act II, one of the most important love duets in operatic repertoire and the musical manifestation of Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Idea*. In his programme notes, Wagner wrote that there is "henceforth no end to the yearning, longing, rapture, and misery of love: world, power, fame, honor, chivalry, loyalty, and friendship, scattered like an insubstantial dream; one thing alone left living: longing, longing unquenchably, desire forever renewing itself, craving and languishing; one sole redemption: death, surcease of being, the sleep that knows no waking!" (Bailey 1985:47). It is clear that it was Wagner's intention to create constant dissonant chords to provoke the feeling of longing and desire throughout *Tristan und Isolde*.

"Upon the stage, walk sounds, not people" (Carnegy 2006:58). These words by Paul Bekker relate to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, which Wagner described as a spiritual drama. Wagner's brief for the design of this opera required great open spaces where the focus ought to be on the love duets, and not on the scenery. Romantic Naturalism²³ was at the order of the day in scenic design at the time of the first staging of *Tristan und Isolde* in 1865 and had a definite influence on it. The Bayreuth Festival was still a dream, and Wagner had to work with designers assigned to his operas by the theatres in which they were staged, in this case the *Königliches Hof- und Nationaltheater*, the royal seat in Munich. Wagner was pleased with the scenic design, although the lighting technology of the day made the juxtaposition of night and day, which is central to the concept of *Tristan und Isolde*, difficult to master. The scenic painters had to paint

²² *Träume* is one of five *Lieder* known as the *Wesendonck Lieder*.

²³ Romantic Naturalism is a late nineteenth century movement against the artificial theatricality of contemporary forms of playwriting and acting (Hartnoll 1957:564). In the case of scenic design, this would mean that this movement was a truthful representation of the space represented on stage, without artificiality.

shadows and highlights onto the set itself to try to achieve the proper lighting conditions for each scene (Carnegy 2006:59).

At the end of the nineteenth century, a Swiss visionary and scenic designer came on the scene who would revolutionise theatre design, and specifically design for Wagnerian dramas. Adolphe Appia is known for his book *La mise en scène du drame Wagnérien* (1895). One must keep in mind that the Wagner family became inheritors of the whole estate, including the rights to produce Wagnerian opera after the death of the composer in 1883. These *inheritors* took it upon themselves to take on a museum approach to the operas of Wagner (Carnegy 2006:176). This means that his last wife, Cosima, started a tradition of restaging works in the precise Wagnerian manner without moving forward. The sustainability of these actions was questioned widely, although Cosima Wagner managed to rid the Wagner family and Bayreuth of its debt accumulated by Richard Wagner himself. One can speculate that a designer like Adolphe Appia, a radical thinker bringing abstract forms and alternative methods of staging to the table, would ruffle the feathers of the Wagner family. Appia argued that Wagner lost his way in staging his own productions down the road of scenic realism (Carnegy 2006:178). The continued efforts by the Wagner family to restage exact replicas of the maestro himself became redundant, and directors like Gustav Mahler and designer Alfred Roller were some of the first teams to implement ideas of the Secessionist Aesthetic²⁴ in theatre design that would challenge these staging methods.

Carl Moll, Gustav Klimt, Alfred Roller and Kolo Mosser led the group that started the Vienna Secession (Carnegy 2006:162). As newly appointed resident conductor of the Vienna Court Opera, Mahler became the vehicle in theatre for this Secession or *Vereinigung Bildender Künstler Österreichs* (Association of Austrian Artists) as they called themselves. One can speculate that it was not until this point during which a deliberate removal of boundaries between all art forms was sought, that the

²⁴ Secessionist Aesthetic refers to the movement at the dawn of the twentieth century attributed with changes within aesthetic norms that are associated with the rise of modernism. These movements albeit a quest for aesthetic innovation, sought after reform in the Fine Arts through a wide spectrum of ideologies (Jensen 1996:167).

Gesamtkunstwerk itself, as Wagner devised it, could truly be manifested in the staging of his operas. Mahler met Roller around 1902 when the latter approached him with some sketches he made in response to his disapproval of Mahler's earlier staging of *Tristan und Isolde*. At this point Mahler had already appointed the scenic painter Heinrich Lefler, who had been trained at the Academy, who attempted to eliminate flats and unnecessary props that crowded stage design, earning himself the appellation 'Raumschöpfer'²⁵ (Carnegy 2006:162).

Meeting Roller completed Mahler's vision of a shared space that could fuse the different forms of art. Mahler was indeed so impressed with Roller's vision that he offered him the set design for the next production of *Tristan und Isolde* (Carnegy 2006:162). This is seen as a turning point in the course of opera production as this is where the barrier between the vision of the artist and that of the wealthy patron was finally broken (Carnegy 2006:162). Wagner's *Tristan* seemingly started to radicalise the multiplicity of the art form he composed it for. Together with guidelines from Appia's writings, the Mahler-Roller team started to revolutionise the staging of opera and the understanding of space. It was, however, not until a few decades later that Appia's vision would truly manifest on stage. He shared Wagner's love of the writings of Schopenhauer, although there was one fundamental difference between them, which was that Appia found the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in his words, to be simply *nonsense* (Carnegy 2006:179).

²⁵ A *Raumschöpfer* is a creator of space (Carnegy 2006:162).



Figure 39. First model for *Tristan und Isolde* by Angelo Quaglio (1865)

Appia approved of Wagner's view of opera as deeds of music made visible (Carnegy 2006:179). Appia saw that the key to the musicalisation of the stage picture was lighting. Therefore, the only credible source for the stage picture was the music itself, with changes in lighting moods to change with the quintessentially dynamic music. According to Appia, the sets for *Tristan und Isolde* had to be stronger in mood than any sense of time and place, for instance (Carnegy 2006:179). By removing all unneeded props and flats, and designing only big rostra's, staircases and big neutrally painted set pieces (See Figure 40), Appia sought to make the movement of the singers within the space his sole purpose. His driving force was to interiorise drama and to make the

action on the stage the focus, and the design the tool to set the mood for the action without overruling it.

In Act I of *Tristan und Isolde*, the scene on board the ship must, according to Appia, be the last glimpse of the material and tangible world in an atmosphere that had to be designed primarily for the ease of movement of the singers (Carnegy 2006:179). Wagner's instructions in his prose draft for *Tristan und Isolde* in 1857 required a large seagoing ship richly hung with tapestries; it should resemble Isolde's private cabin and a central curtain that can be opened to reveal the length of the ship towards the bow. Tristan stands at the helm with a group of sailors just behind him (Wagner 2011:4). Wagner also requested a small strip of land to be visible on the horizon. This possibly added to the tension of the pending arrival at Cornwall. At the end of Act I Wagner wanted the central curtain of Isolde's cabin to be opened wide to show the whole entourage of sailors and companions on board the ship with sailors all waving their hats (Wagner 2011:10).

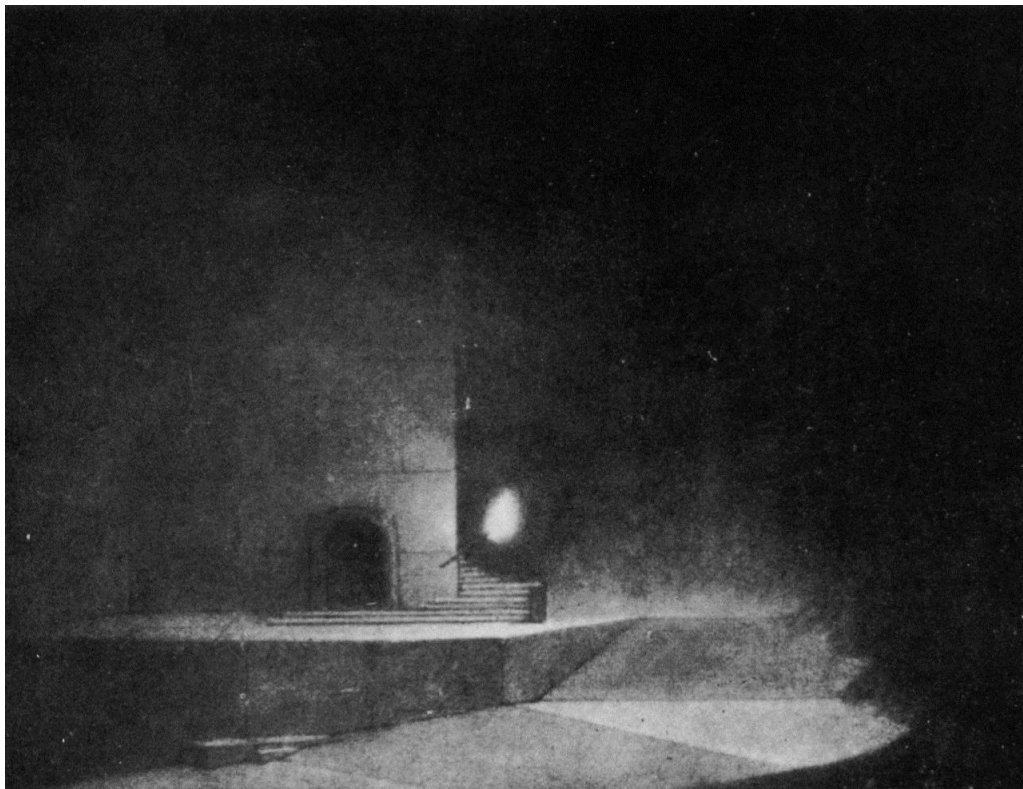


Figure 40. Act II set design drawing for *Tristan und Isolde* by Adolphe Appia (1923)

According to Appia, Act II should have only suggestions of trees. This very low-lit space is dominated by the glow of a single torch that represents the absence of Tristan, as it is a signal to warn him away. Once Isolde extinguishes the torch the hostile space is wiped out and time is arrested (Carnegy 2006:179). Here the introduction of an abstract space by Appia immerses the two lovers in an endless space. Wagner, however, envisioned something more traditional. The instructions are clear that Act II should be set in an orchard; with steps, a door and gates, and a door slightly open revealing a dimly lit room. One can, however see, that Appia merely simplified Wagner's concept by breaking up this literal space into abstract forms, which in their visual coherence suggest the exact same space with strategic and modest use of lighting. Appia acknowledged a great affinity between music and light in the way that both express an inner essence of the phenomena (Carnegy 2006:179).

Appia's influence on Engels is clear in his design with the concept of setting a mood, rather than dressing the stage. The pieces of scenery in Engels's designs are also simplified, with suggestions of spaces, and juxtapositions of lush and barren, day and night. Appia's concept for Act II is almost a direct reference for Engels's designs, as Engels used a very similar approach in designing the stairs to the castle with the open door and the torch.

3.1 *Tristan und Isolde* in South Africa

The first staging of *Tristan und Isolde* in a South African theatre was at the Nico Malan Theatre in Cape Town in 1983 by Gunther Schneider-Siemssen. This was a milestone in South African theatre history, commemorating the centenary of Wagner's death. This production was overshadowed by the PACT production at the State Theatre in 1985 for a few noteworthy reasons. The *Tristan und Isolde* for Cape Town was produced, directed, designed and lighted by Gunther Schneider-Siemssen, therefore it was not a locally produced production. This resulted in it not being recognised as the first produced *Tristan und Isolde* in South Africa and thus merely being a re-staging of an overseas production in a local theatre (Eichbaum 1985:87). Furthermore, the CAPAB

orchestra had to be supplemented with professional players from Vienna. The production itself received good reviews, in particular by Julius Eichbaum (1985:87).

Because of the sheer length of the opera, especially the Act II love duet, the directorial influence in a production like *Tristan und Isolde* is of particular importance, as Eichbaum also states in his article about the CAPAB Opera revival of the Schneider-Siemssen *Tristan und Isolde* in 1990. Eichbaum criticised Gunther Schneider-Siemssen, director of the 1983 Cape Town *Tristan und Isolde* for not having a strong directorial voice. According to him, the singers were left to figure out their own steps that resulted in a lot of meaningless movement around the set. According to Eichbaum (1985:88, 96) it seemed that the 1990 revival posed the same problem.

As Artistic Director of PACT Opera Neels Hansen, together with the musical director of the company, Prof. Leo Quayle planned the company's yearly repertoire according to the musical and artistic development that they felt had to be practised at that time. They were not at all conservative regarding what they thought such a young company could achieve, as by 1989 PACT Opera's repertoire boasted a much wider range than that of the Metropolitan Opera of New York and many European opera houses (Hansen, personal communication 2014). When deciding to stage *Tristan und Isolde*, Hansen knew the company was ready to stage a Wagner opera of this scale. Although *Tristan und Isolde* was first staged in Cape Town in 1983, PACT Opera had already planned to do the production long in advance and had set a few years aside for its planning. PACT Opera was therefore the first to conceive this musical drama in South Africa and produce it locally. The long awaited debut at the State Theatre in Pretoria brought international acclaim for this Wagnerian music drama, drawing an international audience. Marking this event, Wolfgang Wagner (See Figure 41 and 42), the grandson of the composer, was convinced by his friends to attend the opening night as, according to them, South Africa had reached a pinnacle in cultural and economic growth and that, with its international status, PACT would stage a noteworthy production (Collier 1985:12). The production did not fall short of their expectations, as Wolfgang Wagner was extremely pleased with the production. He invited Marita Napier to come and study

her role as Isolde under him at Bayreuth and offered to bring the Bayreuth production of *Die Meistersinger* to South Africa in the years following the production (Hansen, personal communication 2013).



Figure 41. Wolfgang and Gudrun Wagner are welcomed to the State Theatre marking a historical moment in South African Theatre (1985) Photograph by Nan Melville (State Theatre Archives)



Figure 42. From left front: Gerd Brenneis (Tristan), Johan Engels and Wolfgang Wagner. From left back Michael Rennison (Director), Julius Eichbaum, Gudrun Wagner, Wicus Slabbert (Kurwenal), Marita Napier (Isolde), unknown and Reinhild Runkel (Brangaene) (1985) Photograph by Nan Melville (State Theatre Archives)

Tristan und Isolde was brought to the stage of the State Theatre because PACT Opera strived after slowly educating its audience and introducing lesser-performed productions that one would not usually find regularly in the opera repertoire of big opera companies abroad. At that time, South Africa was in the middle of a recession and a cultural embargo, which made importing singers expensive. In fact, *Tristan und Isolde* lost an estimated R250 000 in 1985, but PACT, just like any other international opera company, did not aim at making money, but to cultivate its audience and spread awareness of the art of opera (Solomon 1985:1).

The complexity of staging a production like *Tristan und Isolde* starts with the singers. These roles are extremely difficult to master as Wagner composed music that challenges both the range and the stamina of his singers (Hansen, personal communication 2013). In contrast with most operas, *Tristan und Isolde* has a very small

cast. For long sections of the opera, the two lovers have their love duets alone on the stage, of which the longest in Act II is a 45-minute uninterrupted melody, implying that these two singers in particular must have an unusually broad vocal range and stamina (Boyden 1997:247). For this reason alone, one would not find more than six people in the world capable of undertaking the role of Tristan or Isolde. Very few have mastered these roles, or dare to sing them on a regular basis (Boekkooi 1985:2).

Tristan und Isolde has a more ambitious orchestration than most operas, and thus requires more musicians and of course more space. The State Theatre orchestra pit was too small to accommodate the full orchestra, so the two downstage storage rooms PS and OP had to be utilised to accommodate more instrumentalists (Hansen, personal communication 2013). Engels had to keep this in mind in his design, as these rooms had to be covered with gauze to hide the orchestra players from the audience; consequently, the conductor, Gabor Ötvös was not able to see them.

Wagner's Tristan und Isolde requires a skillful set and costume designer, who, together with the director, understands the demands of this five-hour production and the static nature of Act II (Hansen, personal communication 2013). The designer should be capable of designing for the music, not overcrowd the stage, and work closely with a lighting designer to capture the essence of yearning and the tragedy in a visual manifestation that changes between day and night, similar to *Phenomenon* and *Noumenon* numerous times, and do so effectively to complement the music and not overshadow it. Johan Engels and the director, Michael Rennison, studied the libretto for three years to create a concept for the State Theatre production (Sichel 1985:5). This concept centred on introducing modern methods of staging and new technology, like projections and the first lasers used in South African theatre. This was also the first production in South Africa that used mirrors to supplement the concept (Engels, personal communication 2014). The use of mirrors in this staging of *Tristan und Isolde* is discussed in further detail later in this study.

One can speculate that *Tristan und Isolde* is the epitome of Wagner's conception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The requirements stated in the libretto for Wagnerian operas are staggering, especially for *Tristan und Isolde*. The musical themes are so complex and precise that each movement and visual effect must be considered with great precision to keep all these elements in service of the drama, as Wagner insisted (Hansen, personal communication 2014). The next section discusses the conception of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

3.2 A *Gesamtkunstwerk*

3.2.1 *Myth and ideologies*

Plato's *Ideas and Forms* is a form of mediation between Will and Phenomena. Here all the art forms but music are metaphors and representations of external ideas, seemingly the root of Schopenhauer's ideologies (Carnegy 2006:50). According to Schopenhauer, music is an image of Will itself, whereas the other arts are images of Ideas (Carnegy 2006:51). These Ideas are, according to Schopenhauer, the objectification of the Will. By synthesising the Will and Idea, Wagner envisaged a more powerful form of art, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where all the art forms are fused on stage to be in service of the Will, the music. It is clear that during Wagner's conception of the prose for *Tristan und Isolde*, Schopenhauer's influence on Wagner became manifest as he no longer acknowledged the importance of the contemporary great grandeur of picturesque scenery with which his operas had previously been staged (Carnegy 2006:51). Realism and historical accuracy became less important to Wagner, which makes *Tristan und Isolde* the first truly modernist opera in his repertoire. *Tristan und Isolde* marks a movement of evoking emotion and longing, rather than creates a make-believe world from *trompe l'oeil*²⁶ scenery. This clear movement towards modernism in theatre would lead to the birth of Wagner's Bayreuth Festival, to display his future operas, like *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, for which it was conceived as a true form of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Carnegy 2006:47).

²⁶ *Trompe l'oeil* is a French word coined for the optical illusion of creating a three-dimensional setting in a two-dimensional space. In theatre, this is used to break the visual boundaries of the stage and to immerse the viewer in an image with such complexity, that it can be perceived as real.

Although Wagner coined the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* during the Romantic period, there were already ideas of this collectivity long before his time. The belief during the period of the Enlightenment was in rational order. Thus, it was a Separationist order with a belief in clarity. There were numerous visionaries who nurtured the same concept of this synthesis long before Wagner, including Melchior Hoffmann, Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg) and Ludwig Tieck (Carnegy 2006:48). Later in this dissertation, I touch on the Vienna Secession and how Wagner influenced artists of his time and on his notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

In his book, *The Total Work of Art: from Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (2007), Michael Wilson Smith refers to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* depending heavily on the mechanisation in theatre, which creates its pseudo organic effects, while it renounces mechanical production. Wagner himself underscored this in his own work, as he was opposed to mechanisation, but surprisingly, built his productions to rely on it (Smith 2007:8). As Wagner composed in a time of vast industrialisation in Europe, one can assume that writing poetry, and creating fictional heroes and heroines for *Der Ring des Nibelungen* from Norse myths was a way of escaping modernisation and the reason for resenting it. Mechanisation is a key aspect in the resources required when staging a Wagner opera, as most of them rely on creating a mythical world for the singers and audience (Hansen, personal communication 2013).

Wagner's influence during the Romantic Movement had a great impact on theatre in the century that followed his death. Wagner began to write the poetry for *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, with its strong nationalistic undertones, but after reading Schopenhauer's *Will and Idea*, he interrupted the writing of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* to compose *Tristan und Isolde*. One can speculate that his ideas about uniting all art forms was something that was strongly rooted in his ideas of a united Germany, which these four German mythological operas could convey. To synthesise different art forms and restore the Athenian spirit to the German people would thus be the zenith of Wagner's heritage in not only the modernisation of theatre, but also in German culture. This heritage would

affect not only the future of the staging of opera greatly, but also inspire different interpretations of his *Gesamtkunstwerk* and subsequently affect ideologies of German nationalists in the decades following Wagner's death (Carnegy 2006:48).

To understand why Wagner devised the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in his writings about *The Artwork of the Future* (1849), one must look at the search for collectivity amidst alienation, which was the reality of the still-divided Germany (Smith 2007:8). Similarly, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* calls for a synthesis of different art forms such as music, poetry, drama and the visual arts. This cohesion in the arts, or the total art form, was a universal movement in all art forms towards the end of the nineteenth century (Eksteins 2000:25) which makes it a late Romantic concept. A *Gesamtkunstwerk* can probably only be experienced in its totality in theatre during a live performance, as no digital recording of this can substitute for the layered experience from the auditorium (Smith 2007:9). The music and singers, the visual scenery, costumes and lighting, make up this totality.

Eksteins (2000:25) writes in *The Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* about Wagner's supreme synthesis of *Kultur*, not only to elevate his own *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but also art, history, and contemporary life in drama where "... symbol and myth became the essence of existence".

In *Wagner and Schopenhauer* Brener (2014: 62) states that the love duet in Act II of *Tristan und Isolde* is Schopenhauer undisguised, as "... day and light shine on a world of illusion; nothing to be seen is real. Only darkness and night contain reality". Bryan Magee (1997:456) writes in *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, "Of life and death: here there is nothing, *Phenomenon*; being is elsewhere. This world is and is not, and is therefore, in the end, nothing. Only the *Noumenon* is". What Magee writes here does not only echo Wagner's concept for *Tristan und Isolde* but states that the *Phenomenon* is immaterial while the *Noumenon* is a physical experience. The *Noumenon* and *Phenomenon* are two themes that the two lovers move between as they escape from reality to sing their love duet and experience a cosmic journey. As a comparison,

Brener's writing suggests that the two lovers experience the cosmic journey as real and deny the harsh reality that daylight brings as material. This is clear where Tristan is dying in Act III in the delirium scene, as Tristan cries out "... Daylight's deceitful glare ..." (Brener 2014:68), while in fact, it is daylight that has brought disillusion and discomfort to the two lovers. Tristan seemingly becomes aware of the potion that he drank and that it was in fact intended for his death, yet he yearns for Isolde and before she can get to him, utters her name as his last word. This drink of death or love potion is one of the pivotal points introducing the *Phenomenon* and *Noumenon* in Act I, as only after the drinking of this potion, the lovers are truly overwhelmed by their love and the world of the *Phenomenon*, thus offering an escape from the harsh reality of life. The potion is discussed in the next section when I look at the meaning of the *Mutterkünste* and its relevance in *Tristan und Isolde*.

3.2.2 The mother of all arts

In Act I scene iv of *Tristan und Isolde*, Brangaene asks Isolde, "*Kennst du der Mutter Künste nicht?*" before she presents the two lovers with the potion from the *Mutterkünste* box (Wagner 1865). *Mutterkünste* can be directly translated as Mother of the Arts. After drinking the *Tödestrank* and realising that it is actually a love potion, the two lovers are suddenly immersed in a galactic world of sensual fulfilment (Engels, personal communication 2014). One can speculate that this *Mutterkünste* box is thus more than just a box, but the embodiment of the Will and Idea and of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where the two lovers not only find a realm of infinite bliss tangibly and visually, but also musically. In the love duets that follow the drinking of this fateful potion, one notices the awakening of the senses in the love scenes in Act II. The love duet in Act II is known for this synthesis of the senses in Wagner's musical conception, but also for its later modernist execution by Adolphe Appia, which would subsequently inspire theatrical modernism at the turn of the nineteenth century (Carnegy 2006:182).

The mother of all the arts symbolising the awakening of all the senses, gives *Tristan und Isolde* its philosophical nature as an opera. Here Schopenhauer and Lacan come

into play, as within moments of drinking the potion, the gaze²⁷ of the two lovers introduces the spectator to an array of emotions and experiences. This carries on well into the love duet in Act II, as the two lovers are portrayed under the spell of love. Engels's simple use of mirrors in the floor by which the gaze suddenly receives profound depth helped to activate this awakening of the senses. Suddenly the world expands, and the lovers look into it with fulfilment. The next section focuses on the application of mirrors in Engels's interpretation of this love duet that is the epitome of the gaze in Wagner's conception of *Tristan und Isolde*.

3.3 The mirror and the realm beyond

Josef Svoboda is regarded as the pioneer of the mirror²⁸ used in theatrical space (Engels, personal communication 2014). Svoboda's vision was clearly one shared with Appia as Svoboda (1993:20) had a vision that equal attention should be given to the lighting of a design and the concept of the design itself. Svoboda (1993:29) refers to mirrors as objects that eliminate shadows and create strange worlds like those of post-impressionist painters such as Van Gogh. Svoboda used mirrored floors, ceilings and sidewalls, extending the space on the stage to express atmosphere (Engels, personal communication 2014). These mirrored surfaces inspired Engels greatly, and since he had seen productions that Ralph Koltai had designed for the Royal Shakespeare Company at the time that he was contracted to design *Tristan und Isolde* for Pact Opera, this combination of Koltai and Svoboda and current trend in theatre in Europe intrigued Engels. Svoboda used mirrors in combination with other surfaces to add psychological boundaries between the audience and the singers/actors on stage. These included stretched gauzes covering the proscenium, mirrors and a second black proscenium. The opera stage of the State Theatre had a double proscenium at the time

²⁷ The gaze according to Patrice Pavis in *The dictionary of Theatre* (1998:157) is an inexhaustible source of meaning when it comes to characterisation and inter-character relationships as well as the structuring of space and transferring of the meaning of the text to the viewer. According to Pavis, the actor arrests the gaze of the viewer with his/her gaze to penetrate the fictional universe of the stage. She adds that the actor either attracts a direct or frontal gaze (for the spectator to feel identified with the actor), or an indirect gaze, which is a lateral view of the one actor interacting in a gaze with another.

²⁸ Chapter 4 focuses on some relevant connotations of the mirror.

of the staging of *Tristan und Isolde*, and Engels experimented with the front of house stretched gauze to create an illusory world where the spectator sensed a clear boundary between the audience and the drama on stage (Engels, personal communication 2014).

Should the Civic Theatre in Johannesburg have been able to accommodate Engels's original designs, the mirror walls would have added depth to the space he had in mind. Svoboda's intention with a mirrored surface was not to distract the audience, but to show a surface or angle that would usually be out of sight to them, thus elevating the visual experience to that of a much greater complexity. Svoboda utilised big flats with painted scenery far off stage (See Figure 43) that would be reflected by mirrors on the stage, or mirrors facing the stage, reflecting the floor. These surfaces in Svoboda's (1993:57) words, added dynamic possibilities to lighting and the creation of strong silhouettes in a space already flooded by light.



Figure 43. Scene from the staging of Act II of *La Traviata* showing Svoboda's use of tilted mirrors (2014)

By using a combination of more intimate reflective surfaces, Engels successfully conveyed polyscenic-ness to manifest the change from the *Phenomenon* to the *Noumenon* and vice versa,²⁹ thus effectively implementing the Idea (design) to supplement the Will (music). One of the effects evident in Engels's *Tristan und Isolde* was during the drinking of the *Tödestrank* in Act I. Here a clever effect was obtained with reference to a 1930 restaging of the 1882 *Parsifal* in Bayreuth. During this *Parsifal* production, a small Siemens bulb inside the chalice and a motor inside the tabernacle illuminated the grail. This chalice suddenly glowed with a red light while Amfortas and Parsifal bow before the grail (Smith 2007:44). Bearing in mind the concept of the illuminated grail, Engels designed a resin goblet with small mirrors glued to the inside; at the point of Isolde raising the goblet these would be hit by a laser beam bouncing off it in all directions. This effect is followed by Isolde and Tristan standing on a mirror hidden underneath a rostrum that slides out of sight (See Figure 43). The laser yet again beamed downwards, creating a virtual cage around the singers (See Figure 44) followed by numerous other lines projected onto the gauzes to build a three-dimensional prison around them (Engels, personal communication 2014).

It is clear that reflection and the reflective surface of the mirror had made a great contribution to scenic design before Engels's use of it in his designs for *Tristan und Isolde*; the mirror became more than just a decorative item – rather the embodiment of the expansion of theatrical space. The history of the mirror, its place in fine art and its psychology are discussed in further detail later in this chapter, to elaborate on its use in Engels's designs.

²⁹ Polyscenic-ness is a term coined by Josef Svoboda (1993:21), indicating a visible joining and severing of linear continuity of theatre action, and transforming these into separate events or moments.

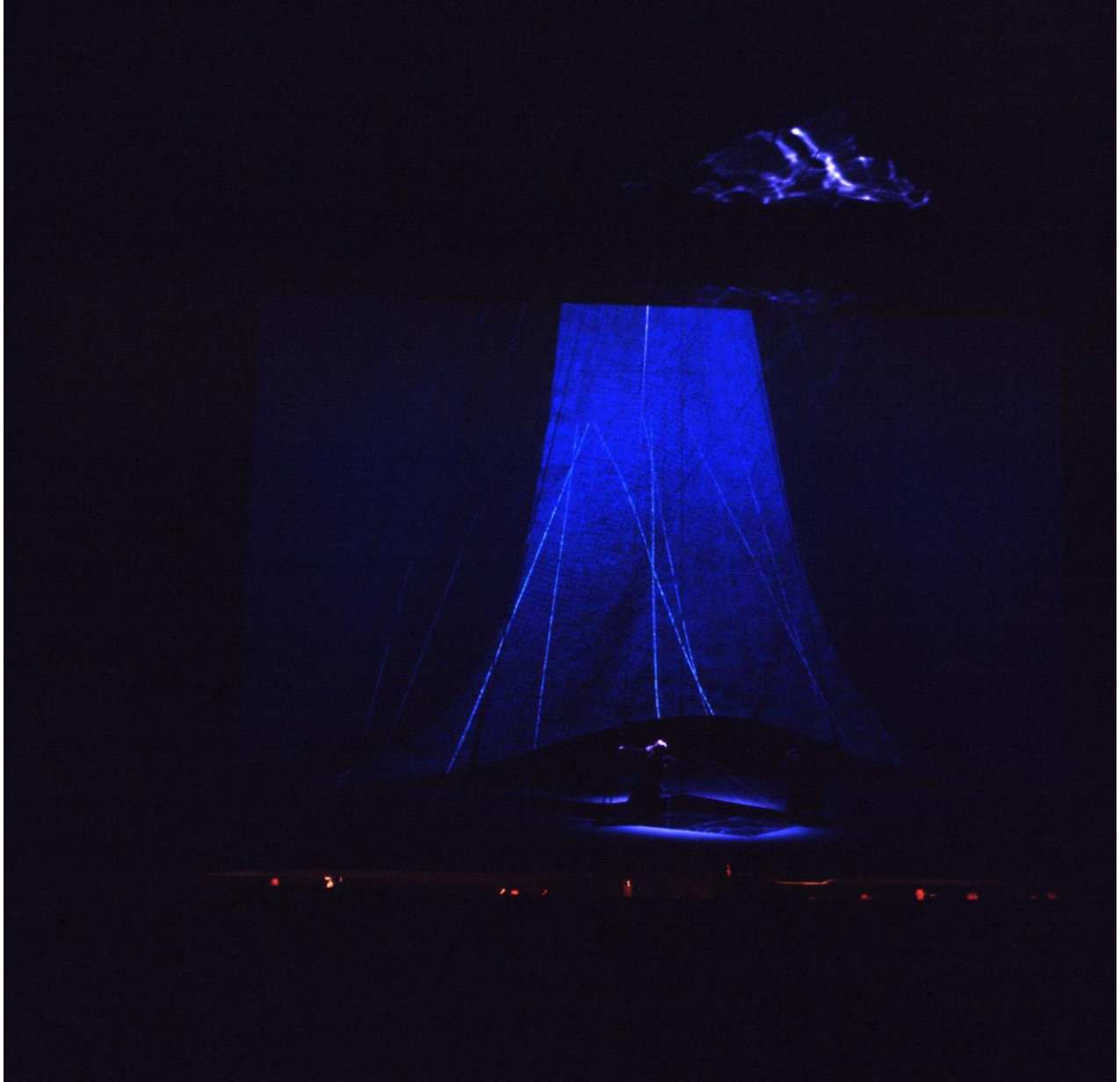


Figure 44. Scene from Act I of *Tristan und Isolde* (1985) showing some of the laser beams projected to form a psychological prison. The light spill from the mirror in the floor is also visible. Photograph by Nan Melville (State Theatre Archives)

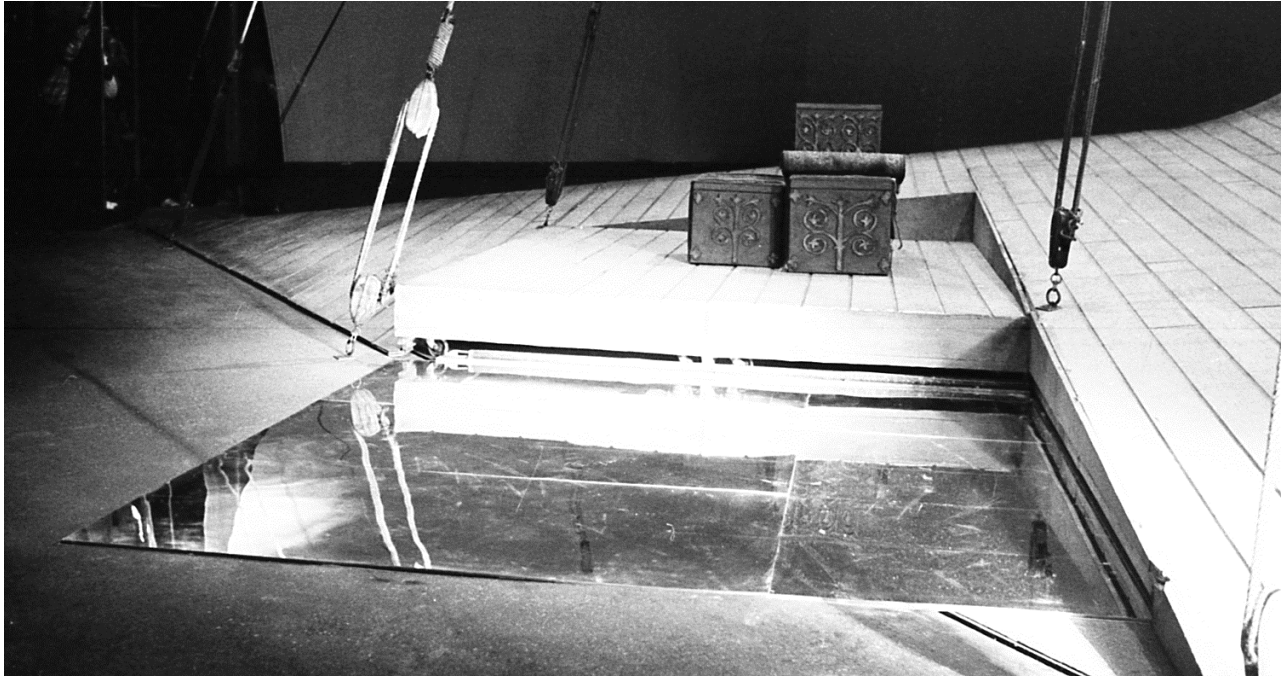


Figure 45. The mirror hidden downstage in the ship's floor in *Tristan und Isolde*.
Photograph by Nan Melville (State Theatre Archives)

3.4 Set, props and costumes

After studying the libretto and Schopenhauer's *The World of Will and Idea*, which initially inspired Wagner's concept for *Tristan und Isolde*, Rennison and Engels came up with a concept that kept in mind the writings of the pioneer of modern stage design, Adolphe Appia, who wrote a few volumes on designing for Wagner's musical dramas (Charlton-Perkins 1985). This concept entailed having three simple sets that slide into or onto one another. Engels had to bear in mind that during the same time that *Tristan und Isolde* was running at the State Theatre opera, *Rigoletto* shared the same venue on different days of the week and its sets had to be able to be stowed backstage on its revolve and moved onto the stage without any major difficulty (Hansen, personal communication 2013). The *Tristan und Isolde* sets thus had to be compact and able to be stowed opposite prompt side on nights when *Rigoletto* was performed. Because of these restrictions, the *Tristan's* set rostrums also had to be able to slide onto each other, thus requiring Engels to design a single rostrum that could be moved into different configurations for Acts I, II and III.

Engels first came up with the concept of a mirror box (Hansen, personal communication 2013). The mirror box would promote the idea of cosmic and endless space, in which Engels and Rennison planned to have the two lovers visually suspended. This meant having two sidewalls made out by towering Perspex mirrors for the whole length, downstage to upstage, nine meters high. Scenic gauze³⁰ was used as a backcloth. A gauze stretched at a 45° angle (See Figure 46), from the first lighting bar located between the movable and real proscenium over the orchestra pit and attached with Velcro to its inside, created a semi-transparent psychological barrier between the singers, orchestra and the audience. Images could be projected onto the gauze from front of house to immerse viewers in the world of the two lovers and their journey through their emotions, while still maintaining a psychological barrier between the real world and that of *Tristan und Isolde* (Sichel 1985:5). The projectors used for these projections were ordered for this production³¹.

³⁰ Gauze is a translucent material that is commonly used in theatre. This versatile material is opaque when lit from front of house and almost completely translucent when lit from behind. It has many uses as it can be used either to do reveals like those outlined above with the help of lighting techniques, be projected onto, partly distort a picture or to paint or build soft props like trees on (Davis 2001).

³¹ These projectors are called *Pani Austrias* and can be attached either to a lighting bar or be placed on the floor. They operate with large slides and a projection lens that project the images on the glass slides onto a surface. This was the biggest single order of these projecting lights from the company. They became largely redundant after the invention of modern day digital projectors (Michaeletos, personal communication 2017).

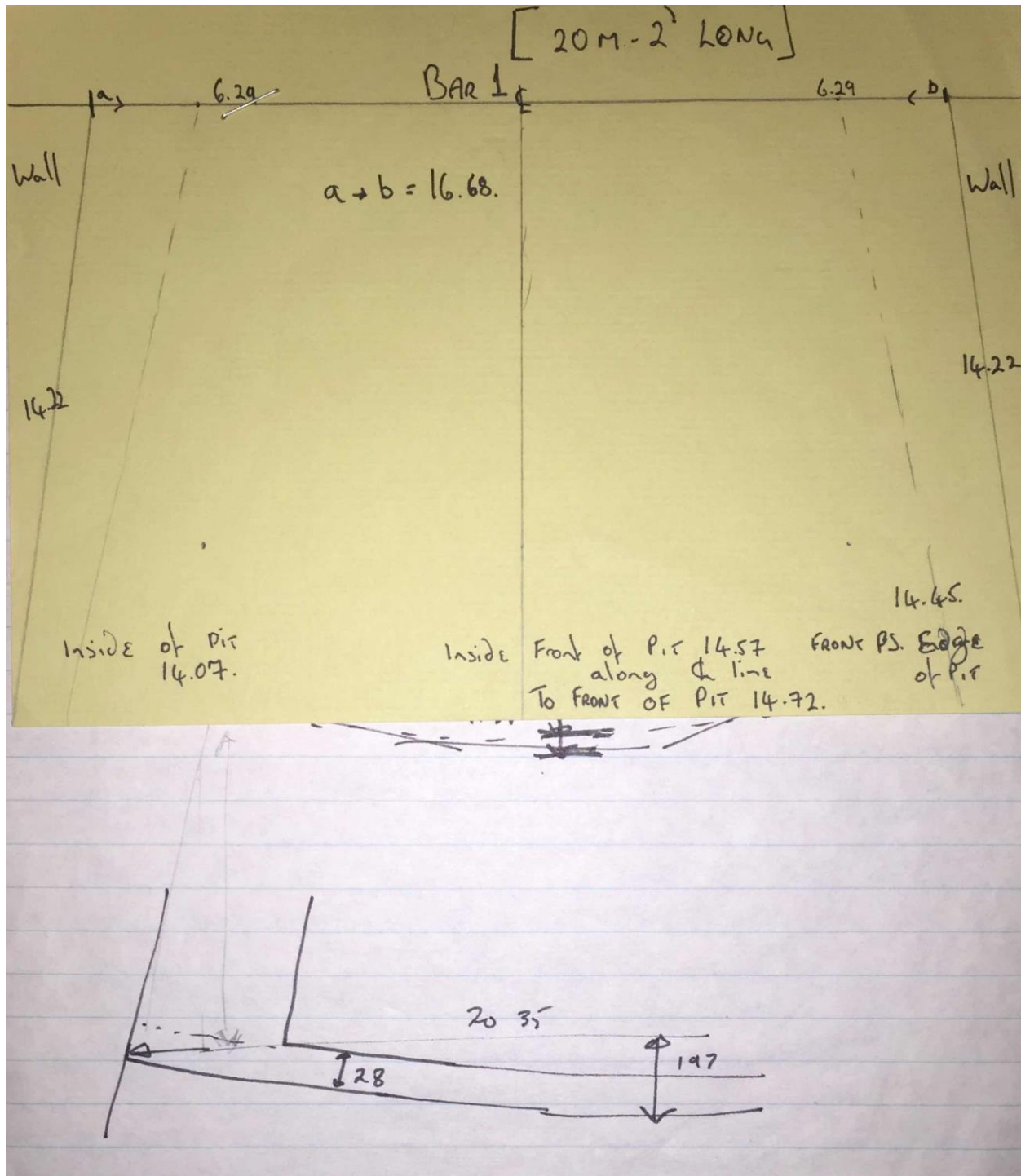


Figure 46. A sketch showing the planning for the front gauze at the *Bauprobe*³² (State Theatre Archives)

³² *Bauprobe* is a term used to describe a viewing of a model by the whole production team in theatre to see how the set will function. This is a supplement to the usual viewing of the model by the artistic director and director of a production, and the practicality of the design and logistical matters are sorted out during this viewing. This probe means that technical staff also get to see exactly from where entrances happen and what the designer has in mind (Payne 1985).

The mirror box idea had to be discarded, since it had major cost implications and was not practical to fly in and out to be stored in the fly gallery³³ during scene changes and after performances. Big theatres like the State Theatre have strict safety measures for storing sets and hanging scenery after performances. Firstly, the T-shaped stage has four fire barriers closing them off from the auditorium as well as one another. This is a routine measure after every show, and nothing is allowed to obstruct these barriers. All hanging scenery, in this case the mirrors, must be flown clear of the proscenium, to avoid contact with the scenery on stage, should there be a fire. The mirror box in Engels's design would be impossible to fly clear in the Civic Theatre, where the production was due to go after its run at the State Theatre, because its newly adapted stage did not accommodate side walls like the ones in Engels's designs. This meant that Engels had to alter his designs completely. He then came up with the idea of gauze of tremendous height (18 m) to form an infinity curve around the set. This could be projected on from the front, the back and the sides, creating the illusion of an endless sphere (Sichel 1985:5).

Act I had a raked boat deck, curving at the bow, as if floor planks on the stage were twisted upwards. Engels's interpretation of Appia's concept for *Tristan* is quite interesting. Although his design concept stated that those of Appia inspired his designs, they were by no means moulded purely on Appia's ideas. Engels opted for a more expressive first Act, being borderline abstract when the lighting, lasers and mirrors were added, whereas Appia's concept was to have a realistic first Act with an abstract second and third. Michel Foucault (1984:185) refers to a ship as being the essence of a "... placeless place that lives by its own devices, that is self-enclosed and at the same time, delivered over to the boundless expanse of the ocean". This placeless place is aesthetically conveyed in Engels's designs for Act I, as the ship is only a visual suggestion, and the practical sail is a curtain that reveals a prison made up by ropes, resembling those that are fixed to a mast. Yet there is no mast, and no rudder, making

³³ A fly gallery is the tower above the stage, accommodating the hanging of scenery and lights from battens above the stage. These can be raised or lowered by controls or hand lines from the fly floor (Rowell 1968:93).

this ship a collection of forms only that psychologically imprison the two lovers. A fully functional and movable sail extending 18 meters upwards from the stage with ropes and pulleys created a visual sweep across the high open proscenium. There was also a hidden mirror in the floor, which was used for lighting purposes, covered by a rostrum on tracks for when Tristan and Isolde were transported through their cosmic journey. In this scene, the lovers stand on the mirror on the floor once the rostrum has been pulled back by ropes underneath the main rostrum. The sail's corner swags open and the set is engulfed in darkness. A laser projected beams around the lovers, forming a visual prison-like structure around them together with the ship's ropes. The relevance of using a laser to achieve this effect is central to Engels's concept, as a laser itself is constructed by the use of a vacuum containing a crystal of a specific colour with two mirrors on either side, one semi-transparent. The light beam is amplified by the reflection between these mirrors and a bright beam escapes the side of the semi-transparent mirror. The lighting designer Nick Michaeletos and Engels created a scatter effect by beaming this laser onto the mirror in the floor, which had a corresponding mirror hanging from the fly tower, thus amplifying this prison-like set of beams with each laser added.

This psychological prison closed in around the two lovers. By having gauzes slowly creeping in, the lighting designer had the opportunity to build a three-dimensional cage around the lovers, as each beam of light was projected onto numerous layers of gauze. More layers of beams were created by scratching the big pieces of film that were projected onto the gauze in front of the mirrors (Engels, personal communication 2014). The purpose of this visually layered space was to serve as the endless cosmic space Engels wanted to portray. Not being able to use side wall mirrors to enhance this concept, Engels used layers of gauze with projections to fabricate a world around the two singers which would look deep and endless, like that of a reflection between two mirrors. The sail was of a fully functional design, replacing the curtain of Isolde's cabin that Wagner mentioned in his guideline for the staging of *Tristan und Isolde* in 1865 (Wagner 2011). This sail could be lowered to obscure the area upstage, allowing the sailors and Tristan to make their entrances from one of the trap doors further upstage

on Stage Lift 4, and revealing this area by raising the OP corner of the sail (See Figure 47).



Figure 47. *Tristan und Isolde* Act I (1985) Photograph by Nan Melville

One of the great technical demands of Act I was the arrival of the ship at Cornwall at the end of the act. Stage Lift 5 was skillfully used, with the fragment of the castle (also used in Act II), banners and royal court waiting for Tristan's ship, on it. At the end of Act 1 the

lift was raised at its maximum speed from underneath the stage (from four floors below to three meters above the stage), to create the illusion of the ship arriving at port as the bow rises over the last wave (See Figure 48 and 49). This had to happen exactly on cue, accompanying the specific moment in the music (Engels, personal communication 2013). This is the only known production where the arrival of the ship at Cornwall was shown, as all productions of Act I usually end on the ship and start at the castle in Act II (Engels, personal communication 2014). In Wagner's libretto sailors waving their hats (Wagner 2011) show the imminent arrival at Cornwall before the music abruptly ends. According to Engels, showing the arrival at Cornwall was very successful, as the music with the theme from Act II that was heard at the end of Act I lends itself to this.

This reveal created great anticipation for Act II and served as a bridge between these two acts. While Act I focuses on the two lovers immersed in their cosmic journey, trapped by forbidden love and defying the real world of duty and expectations, Act II starts in the starkness of daylight, reminding the two lovers of duty and loyalty. Engels and Rennison's version gives the audience a glimpse of this awakening prior the first interval (Engels, personal communication 2014). The first notable layering of illusions to create *trompe l'oeil* scenery is also visible in Act I. Bringing in various gauzes and projecting beams of lasers and scenery turned this sudden but ghostly appearance of the arrival at Cornwall into a striking image to the audience, as for a few moments the sky burst into a three dimensional image.



Figure 48. The arrival at Cornwall at the end of Act I, *Tristan und Isolde* (1985)
Photograph by Nan Melville



Figure 49. Sailors standing on the bow of the ship showing the plastic on the floor
resembling the ocean in *Tristan und Isolde* (1985) Photograph by Nan Melville (State
Theatre Archives)

Act II made use of the rake without the ship's bow and had the castle entrance opposite prompt side with a flaming torch. According to Murray (1980:186) in the *Hall's Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, the portrayal of a castle may be used as a portrayal of the sacred with the secular figures in the foreground. In this case, it might be seen as the sacred with the sinners in the foreground, for their love nest, to which the two lovers retreat, is in the foreground. The so-called love nest to which the two lovers would escape from their duty and expectations in the world to their own inner predicament, had the same hidden mirror from Act I inside it, disguised as a pond with moss and covered by blankets. This act relied greatly on the lighting designer, Nick Michaeletos and his lighting prowess and projections.

Act II started with very lush green foliage projected all over the stage. When Isolde put out the torch, this changed to night. The torch is perhaps one of the most symbolic scenic elements that Wagner used in his guidelines for *Tristan und Isolde*. The extinguishing of the torch signals to Tristan that Isolde is alone (Wagner 2011), but also stops time. According to Carnegy (2006:181), the extinguishing of the torch shows the arrest of time, and thus one can speculate that it is at this instant that the two lovers escape to cosmic space; however, it also signifies death, which will happen in Act III, as a torch is a symbol of life (Murray 1980:305). In Engels's design, stars appeared all around the characters at this moment, as all light was diminished. To obtain this effect, pieces of gauze slowly crept in behind the characters. Thus, every beam of light fell on each gauze, making the characters seem to be standing in a galactic space between clouds and stars and milky ways. In this scene, there is a bright sudden change to the light, announcing the entrance of King Mark after Tristan and Isolde have fallen asleep. Usually this is portrayed by simply changing from night to day (Engels, personal communication 2013). Engels, however, required that a bright open white spotlight suddenly fall onto the two lovers like that of a prison tower searchlight. This starkness also transformed the set to one that was lit to show the decay of the castle, the barren landscape and leafless tree branches (See Figure 50). These conveyed the discomfort in this scene and the sudden change from the *Noumenon* to the *Phenomenon*, being

disillusioned by the starkness of reality. According to Engels (2014), this was done to convey the lovers being trapped in a world where they cannot be together in reality.



Figure 50. *Tristan und Isolde* Act II (1985) Photograph by Nan Melville (State Theatre Archives)

Act III shows Tristan's castle ruins as he is dying in the shadow of a broken column. Engels conceived the concept for the design of *Tristan und Isolde* on the island of Capri off the coast of Naples, Italy. According to Engels (personal communication 2014), there

was a small rock formation in the sea that he saw from his hotel while working there. This barren piece of rock served as his inspiration for the last Act of *Tristan und Isolde* and he started his drawings, using the form of this specific formation. The slightly higher raked set represented a barren and deserted landscape in ruin. It resembles Tristan's land of birth and is the site of his final pilgrimage when he is dying. Isolde's entrance was also achieved by one of the trap doors in Stage Lift 5 used to bring her into sight (See Figure 51), almost floating weightlessly from behind this rock formation. The symbolism of a landscape like this can be referred to as *paysage moralisé* or *moralised scenery*. This steep and rocky landscape can be regarded as the path of virtue (Murray 1980:186).

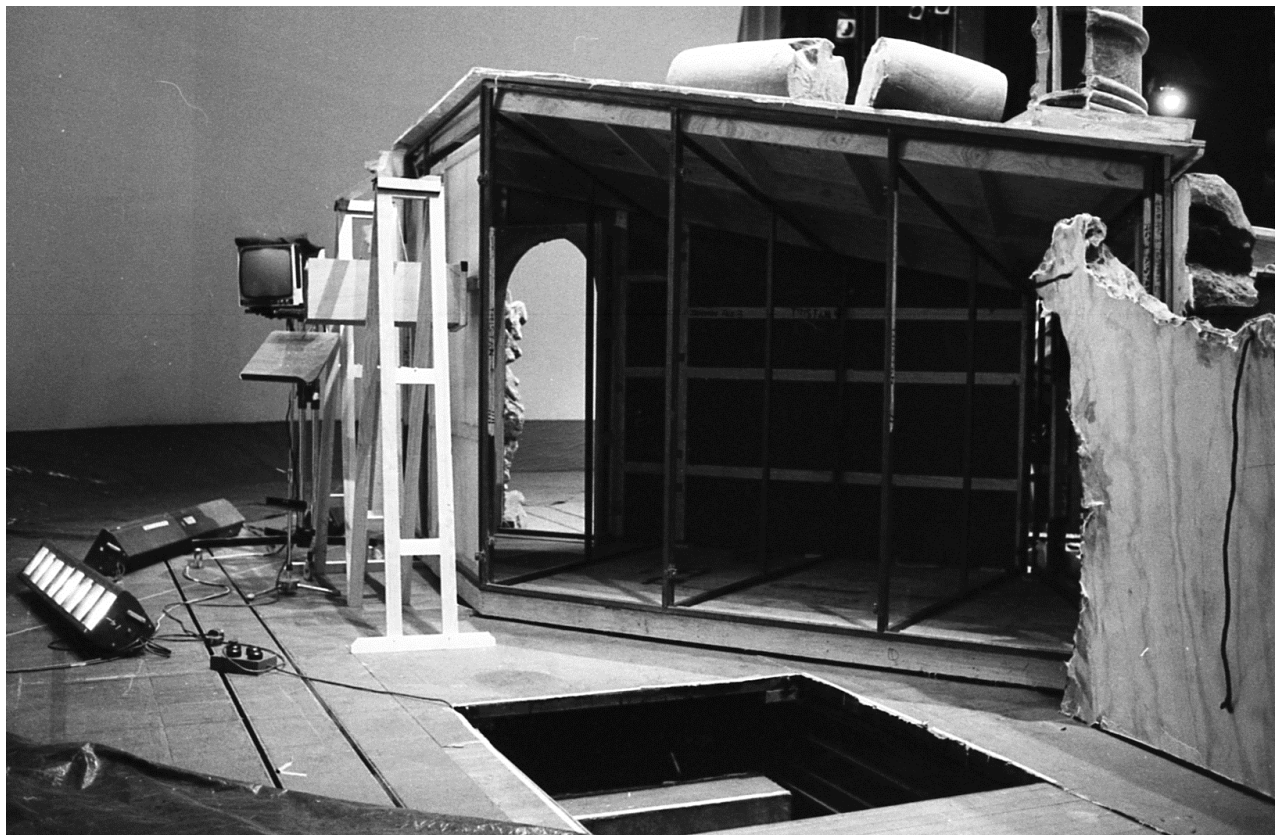


Figure 51. Upstage trapdoor for entrance of Isolde in Act III, *Tristan und Isolde* (1985)
Photograph by Nan Melville (State Theatre Archives)

Act III ends with the *Liebestod* or Transfiguration, with the slow death of Isolde who passes into the lovers' eternity with Tristan. Engels decided to have a solar eclipse

occur behind Isolde while she sings these last words (See Figure 52). A light with a specially designed shutter together with a circular white piece of flat hung behind the upstage gauze was used to obtain this effect. Most directors tend to welcome a physical death for Isolde, but this end resided well with the concept of the *Phenomenon* and the *Noumenon* (Engels, personal communication 2013), as the impossible love of this world made them yearn for that of eternity. Engels (personal communication 2014) also mentioned that there is no clear indication that the potion in Act I was in fact a potion for either death or love, which leaves one to question whether the two lovers were not in fact in love all along.

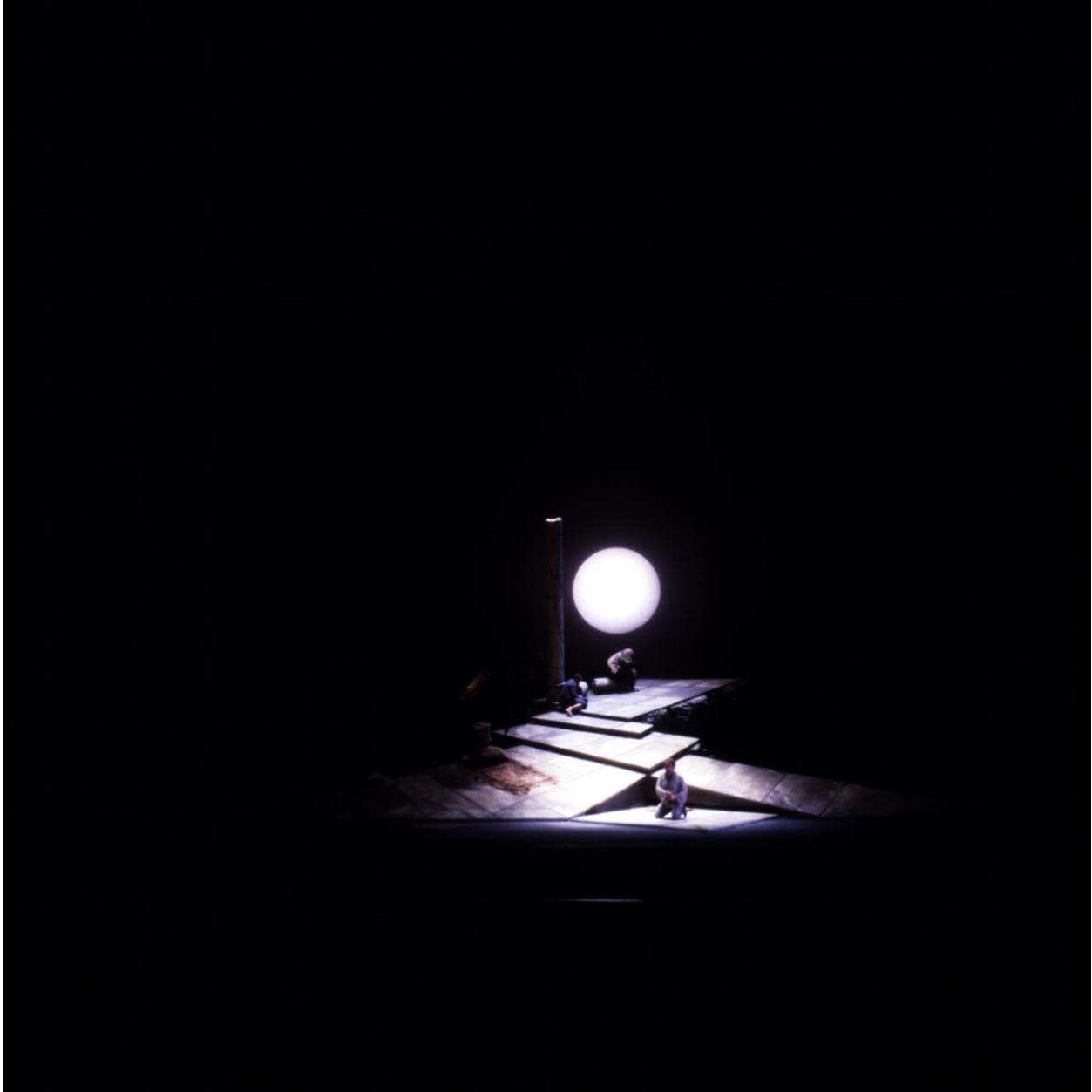


Figure 52. *Tristan und Isolde* Act III (1985) Photograph by Nan Melville (State Theatre Archives)

The inspiration for the costumes for *Tristan und Isolde* (Figure 53 to 56) were derived from the Middle Ages. According to Luci Barton (1935:142), the fabrics used during this time were soft and heavy, to fall in lightweight folds. The wool fabrics were double-faced and dyed in yarn. Almost all the *Tristan und Isolde* costumes were made from heavy wool in rich colours and textures. All the fabrics for Isolde's dresses were woven on a loom at the State Theatre to create the textures that Engels requested and to look less

machine-made to suit the period. As a student of Neels Hansen, Engels would be familiar with the method Hansen employed when designing costumes. Hansen (personal communication 2013) mentioned in an interview in 2013 that his first approach to costume design was to envision the silhouette of the costume like a shadow figure, and design it accordingly. This is quite evident in Engels's costume designs, as strong silhouettes always characterise them. Medieval costumes rely heavily on a proper silhouette as it defines the period. For instance, female dresses fell to the floor in light folds without petticoats (Barton 1935:142).

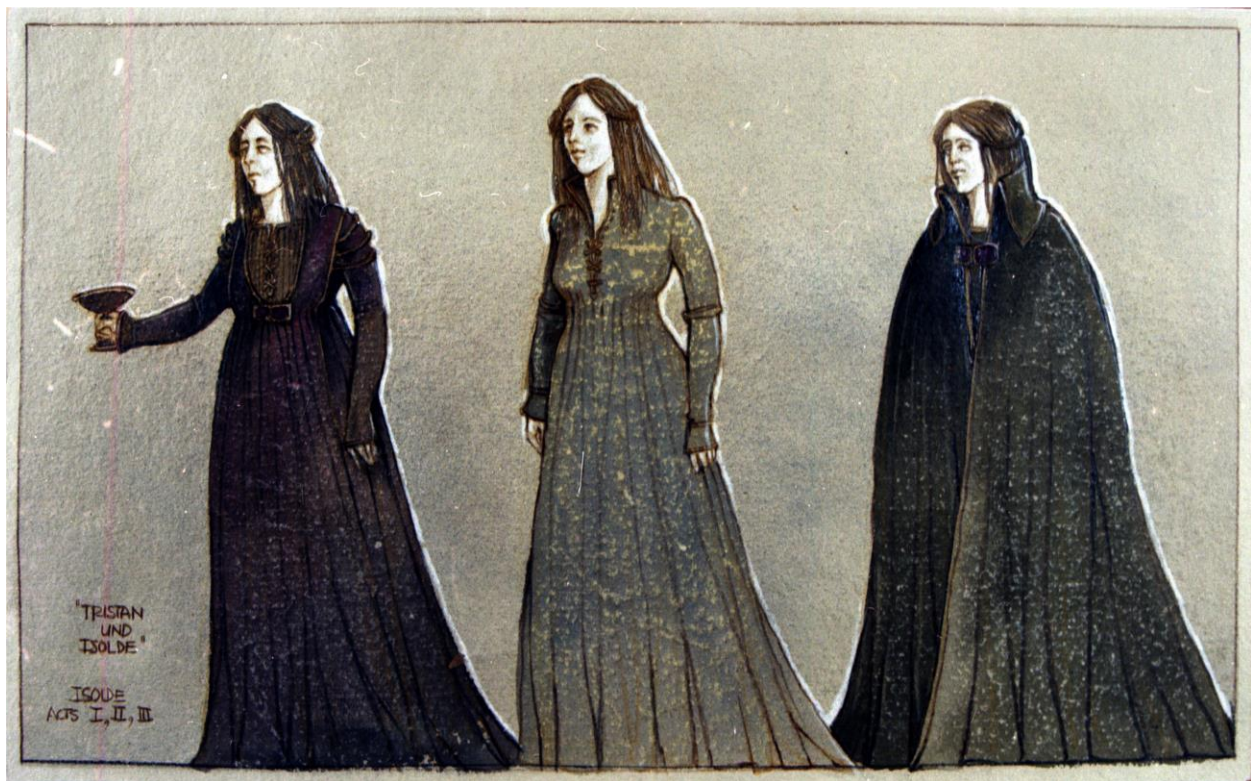


Figure 53. *Tristan und Isolde* costume design for Isolde, Act II by Johan Engels (1985) (State Theatre Archives)



Figure 54. *Tristan und Isolde* costume design for Tristan, Act II by Johan Engels (1985) (State Theatre Archives)



Figure 55. *Tristan und Isolde* costume design for seamen, Act II by Johan Engels (1985) (State Theatre Archives)



Figure 56. *Tristan und Isolde* costume design for hunters and soldiers Act II (1985) Johan Engels (State Theatre Archives)

For *Macbeth* Engels wanted tabards from fabrics made on a loom (Figure 57) that was specially built by the State Theatre workshops to weave different pieces of ribbons and cut fabric into a workable piece of cloth (Lovegrove, personal communication 2014). These tabards were re-used for *Tristan und Isolde* and inspired the textured and layered nature of the textiles used throughout the opera.

The characters that were notably in keeping with Engels's expressive style were the sailors and the soldiers. Their costumes are heavy and form a strong masculine silhouette. The crowns used for this production had to be hand-beaten brass crowns and were taken from drama stock (i.e. for *Macbeth*). It is clear that the costumes for *Tristan und Isolde* can be categorised into two categories: Firstly there are the expressive costumes of the sailors that lean more towards deliberate sculpted silhouettes than historical costumes as they are imposing characters that add to the disillusionment of the two lovers; these costumes include those of the hunters and

palace guards with strong lines and masculine silhouettes. Secondly, there are the medieval costumes for the women in the court in slender fitting woven designs that fall to the floor in folds and the courtiers in masculine costumes in the same historical context of design (Lovegrove, personal communication 2014).



Figure 57. Kobus O'Callaghan fitting the tailor Josef Japie with one of the *Macbeth* tabards as re-purposed for *Tristan und Isolde* (1985) Photograph by Nan Melville (State Theatre Archives)

Tristan und Isolde was not meant to have too many props on stage, and thus only the vital items had to be made (See Figure 58) (Hansen, personal communication 2013). The *Mutterkünste* box is a very intricate and detailed object that had mirrors inside it. The six vials and goblet were in their own compartments inside this mirrored chest.

Upon opening, this mirrored box would cast light outward to produce its otherworldly mystical gleam. The goblet was made from resin and had small mirrors glued to the inside like an inverted disco ball. This ensured that when the lovers stood together with the potion between the lasers, the light projected onto it would bounce off in numerous directions, momentarily engulfing them in light. The *Mutterkünste* box shared a place with other prop chests. These were wrapped in carpets and ropes and were functional as seating during Act I. Because of concepts like that of Appia, which Engels adopted in his own design concept, the majority of all the unnecessary and overcrowding props were limited to only the basic items that were central to the libretto and on which the singers' actions relied. In Wagner's libretto for *Tristan und Isolde*, Act I begins with Isolde sitting on with numerous cushions into which she presses her face. Behind her, the curtain of her cabin halfway upstage is closed. She tells Brangaene to open this curtain because she is suffocating (Wagner 2011:4). In Engels's *Tristan und Isolde* designs, the couch is absent. Instead, the casks and chests become the place where Isolde is sitting. The mast is lowered at this point, closing off the bow of the ship, representing the curtain in Wagner's guidelines for *Tristan und Isolde*, and then swag open in the opposite prompt side corner to reveal the bow of the ship.

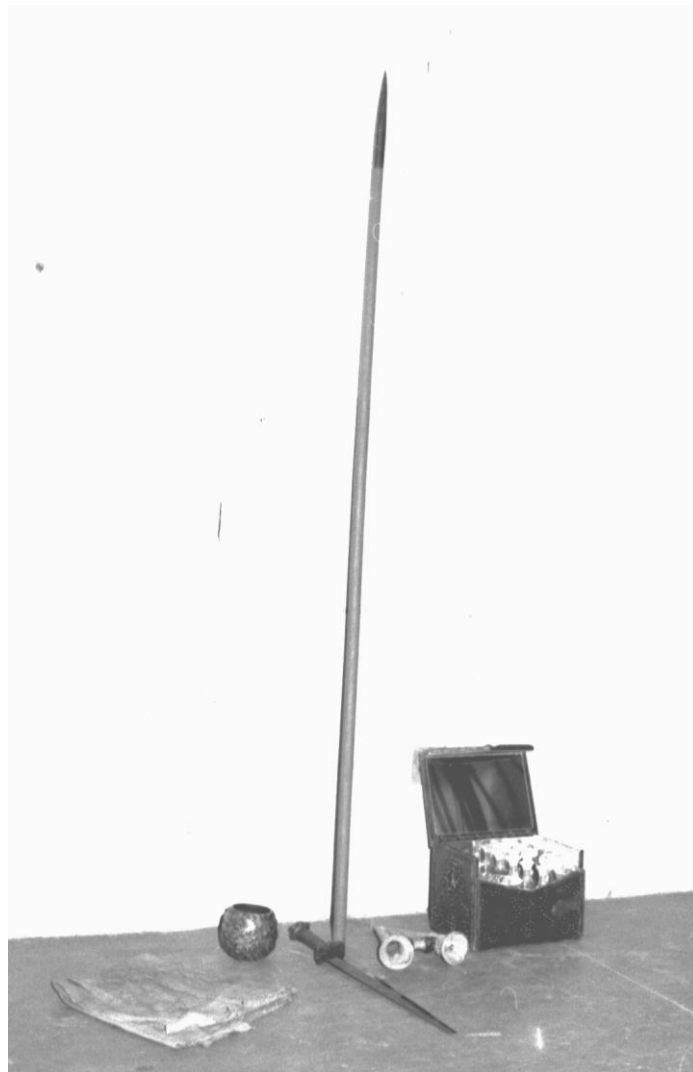


Figure 58. Collection of small props for *Tristan und Isolde* (1985) Photograph by Nan Melville (State Theatre Archives)

The remainder of the props include casks and chests wrapped in carpets for Act I, the love nest for Act II and a calabash, shepherd's flute and hide for Act III.

Because Wagner's composition for *Tristan und Isolde* relies on a fused art form, there had to be a strong coherence between the different service departments at the State Theatre, Engels and Rennison to create this cosmic space successfully (Engels, personal communication 2014). Rennison suggested a new trend in German and European theatre at that time that was to have a *Bauprobe* that would allow the production team to get a better idea of what could be achieved, should the final design

be accepted regardless of its demands and financial implications. This settled a specific issue surrounding the gauze stretched from the first bar over the orchestra pit (Hansen, personal communication 2013). The conductor Gabor Ötvös was concerned that the stretched gauze would interfere with the acoustics of the theatre. Because the music is the most important part of an opera, this issue had to be resolved urgently and the gauze had to be rigged during a rehearsal to do acoustic tests. The production team and Ötvös found that there very little to no interference was caused in the acoustics by this element in the design (Engels, personal communication 2014).

The *Bauprobe* cleared up some of the uncertainties about the projections and the laser beams. It was also at this viewing that the use of mirrored sidewalls was finally ruled out owing to their severe weight. These side walls were replaced with a cyclorama and gauze surround that Engels (personal communication 2014) said in retrospect tied in with the design just as successfully.

3.5 Impact and Influence

The public met the production of *Tristan und Isolde* with mixed feelings. Almost every review in newspapers like *Beeld*, *Rapport*, *Volksblad*, *Pretoria News* and *Sunday Times* heralded it for its unequalled contribution to South Africa's musical history and for establishing the State Theatre as an internationally ranking theatre. These reviews came to a halt as soon as word reached the media that the production lost R250 000 (Solomon 1985:1). Because the State Theatre was at that point a government funded theatre, the public in the midst of a recession did not approve the news of the cost. The head of PACT Opera, Johan Maré responded with a statement in the paper, claiming that these losses were expected. He also emphasised, as previously stated, that the aim of PACT was to educate its audiences and bring them quality productions with internationally acclaimed cast members as an investment in the art of opera and the cultural heritage of the country (Solomon 1985:1).

The Wagner family received the production exceptionally well and even signed a contract to bring Bayreuth productions to South Africa (Collier 1985:12). Although contracts were signed and costumes flown in, this plan was short-lived, as the value of the Rand plummeted to an ultimate low before *Der Meistersinger* could be brought to Pretoria and the sets became far too costly for South African Airways as sponsor to import (Hansen, personal communication 2013). This is the only instance in the history of the Bayreuth Festival, in which the theatre offered to sell a production to a theatre abroad (Hansen, personal communication 2014).

Setting a new standard for future productions at not only the South African State Theatre but also nationally, *Tristan und Isolde* (1985) left a definite mark on the history of South African theatre (Hansen, personal communication 2014). The decade following the staging of *Tristan und Isolde* would see PACT maturing into a competitive international theatre market. Julius Eichbaum, who used to be the most influential opera critic in South Africa with his journal *Scenaria* published a retrospective review on both the CAPAB and PACT Opera staging of *Tristan und Isolde*, outlining its influence on the South African operatic scene. Eichbaum criticised the raising of the curtain at the State Theatre at the beginning of each act after the overture (Eichbaum 1985:97). According to him, it seriously detracted from the overtures. The reason for the curtain was to make it easier for the characters to take their places on stage prior to their first entrances, and to eliminate backstage noise during the overtures.

Because of the surround gauze in place, singers could not just leap onto the stage from the wings. What Eichbaum misunderstood in his review was the concept of Engels's set designs. He found it difficult to determine whether the concept was abstract, realistic or classic Neolithic (Eichbaum 1985:97). One can argue that the adaptations of Engels's initial design – the removal of the two big side mirrors – led to conceptual vagueness that would otherwise have been very clear. Should they have been present, the landscape would have been abstract throughout the opera, and they would have been a way of binding the concept throughout the three settings, which Engels had to rethink and subsequently replace with a surround gauze.

The absence of the two big side mirrors affected the initial concept greatly; however, the placement of a mirror under the sliding platform in the deck in Act I and the pond in the love nest in Act II brought the viewer to the threshold of the unconscious whereto the two lovers could be transported between each other's gaze and the *Phenomenon*. The next chapter focuses on the history of the mirror and the psychological connection associated with this gaze.

Chapter 4

The mirror: The *speculum* of the unconscious

By looking at the history and the uses of the mirror in art, this chapter attempts to draw parallels between the mirror as a *speculum*³⁴ in fine art and the designs of Johan Engels. I will attempt to compare the given examples with Engels's use of reflection and reflectivity in his designs for *Tristan und Isolde*. According to Chetwynd (1982:262), the mirror image becomes the perfect personification of a union of opposites. This union of opposites is central to the narrative of *Tristan und Isolde* and the pivotal point in Johan Engels's use of mirrors in his designs to signify the threshold of the conscious and the unconscious or the inner and the outer (Chetwynd 1982:261). I will also attempt to position the spectator within this realm of the unconscious by examining the aspects of the gaze and how the use of mirrors as a medium interacts with the singer and the spectator.

4.1 Brief history of the mirror

In reflecting on the history of the mirror as an object, a distinct transition is visible from early curious and practical uses to the once divine symbol as an analogy of the likeness of God. This likeness was seen as emanating from and returning to Him. Later the mirror became a symbol of wealth and stature and eventually a symbol associated with vanity and egocentrism as the mirror's presence became part of the daily lives of its owners (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:111).

Tracing the origins of the mirror itself takes one back to the earliest mirrors that would possibly have been dark pools of still water, or containers with water in them (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:9). The earliest physical manifestation of a mirror is from ancient Anatolia, now forming the greater part of Turkey, in 6000 B.C. where volcanic formed natural

³⁴ A *speculum* according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Difficult Words* (2004:412) is a mirror, reflector made of glass or a piece of metal. *Specula* are the mirrors in a telescope.

glass, called Obsidian, was used as a mirror (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:11). In 4000 B.C., the polished brass mirror made its appearance in Mesopotamia and in Egypt during the dynastic period around 3100 B.C. In South America, polished stone mirrors were used from about 2000 B.C. The Quijia culture in China started with the manufacture of polished bronze and copper mirrors from about 2000 B.C. Other precious metals included speculum, which is an amalgam of different kinds of metal combination, resulting in a highly reflective surface when polished (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:11).

The first metal-coated glass was conceived in Lebanon around the first century AD. In his *Natural History*, the Roman author, Pliny, wrote about mirrors of glass coated with gold leaf at the back (Bostock 1855:193). Archaeologists are uncertain about the gold leaf and suggest that it might rather have been a thin sheet of molten gold added to the back. The Romans manufactured mirrors coated by other metals like molten lead by 77 A.D. (Watson 1788:245). The first account of a still life in art comes from this period. In *Too Beautiful to Picture: Zeuxis, Myth, and Mimesis*, Elizabeth Mansfield (2007:26-29) writes about the Greek fascination with reflection and the quality of light with the introduction of blown glass. Mansfield (2007:26-29) specifically quotes Pliny on the realistic painting that Zeuxis made of grapes for a painting contest, which was so realistic that birds flew onto the stage and started pecking at the painting. Mansfield (2007:26-29) states that Pliny might have intended to raise the following question to the reader: "... if reality and representation can be confused, so can reality and ideality" (Mansfield 2007:26). Clear glass mirrors were produced in Moorish Spain by the eleventh century; this was about 200 years prior to the manufacturing of glass mirrors commencing in Venice, Italy (Ajram 1992).

In the late seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century the mirror became much more than just a looking glass to maintain appearance (Enoch 2006:775-781). The first record of a mercury amalgam deposited onto glass is by Chinese craftsmen as early as 500 A.D. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1887) outlines that this process was eventually perfected during the Renaissance by combining tin and mercury in an amalgam and applying a very thin coat of it to the back of glass. The more pristine the

quality of the glass and the more evenly the amalgam was applied, the more perfect was the mirror (Rapp 2009:21). The Venetians had perfected this process by the sixteenth century, as Venice became known for its glass and mirror production at Murano (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:18-20). The size of mirrors was always rather small until the Venetians perfected the technique of adding molten metal onto bigger sheets of glass. Thermal shock in the glass usually caused cracks and breaking, until the recipe for the glassmaking and the amalgam were perfected during these years. Venetian glass for mirrors was made from a closely guarded formula stating the accurately measured amount of palm ash and lime added to sand. In 1503 the German company called Bohemia became well known for more affordable mirrors after perfecting the method of making mirrors from crystalline glass (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:18).

After the Venetian success of coating larger sheets of glass with silver mercury amalgams, a company called The Royal Saint-Gobain Company was founded in France; it reportedly bribed workers from the Venetian company to practise their trade in France, and exploited these workers for their knowledge of this superior craft in a historical form of industrial espionage (Melchior Bonnet 2002:35-39). The size and clarity of mirrors improved, and quickly rooms in royal palaces like Versailles' Mirror Hall, started to be adorned with these magnificent symbols of wealth. Versailles was the first of these palaces, setting a trend for other European palaces and houses of the nobility; the custom of using large mirrors in interior design spread across Europe (Melchior Bonnet 2002:46-48). Mirrors were some of the most expensive items that became fashionable among the aristocracy. They were still made by coating glass sheets with a very poisonous silver mercury amalgamate until around 1900 (Hadsund 1993:3-16). In 1835, a German national, Justus von Liebig, perfected the method of adding silver to glass, which was substituted for the poisonous amalgams and is still used to make mirrors (Enoch 2006).

The uses of mirrors quickly inspired artists, as they gave the artist a way of experiencing the expanded world through this added dimension. The mirror became a way of self-reflection and self-study, but also a way of practising the gaze and composition. The

next section attempts to see how the mirror affected the artists from different periods as well as how art informed the spectators' view to become gradually more evolved through the gaze. I also look at how artists perceived Wagner's work, and how his ideas brought about the eventual mind shift of a group of artists during the Vienna Secession and contributed to Modernism. The intention of the next section is to situate Engels's designs for *Tristan und Isolde* within a theoretical framework of the fine arts.

4.2 The looking glass of the artist

4.2.1 The mirror in the history of art

During the Renaissance the mirror became a very important object in the arts, when its previously elusive mystery gave way to a more scientific and philosophical approach in its use. It gave the artist the opportunity to experience the science of sight (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:119). Leonardo da Vinci preferred the use of the mirror to look at the reflections of the subjects in his paintings to see if their likeness in the mirror corresponded to the likeness in the portrait (Bryant 2014). The Renaissance, with the aid of mirrors, gave birth to Individualism, as man could not only stand back and experience himself through a looking glass, but also experience an elective infinity with many different perspectives of reality. The German philosopher and cardinal Nicholas de Cusa is among the first philosophers to identify this specular perception of an infinite universe (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:118). The mirror thus started to impose distance and separation within a formerly closed system (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:119). Soon the medieval mysticism of the mirror was adopted to create a place for the mirror as the link between God and the world (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:118-119).

In this section, I discuss some examples of the uses of mirrors in art by focusing on the work of three different artists: Van Eyck, Velázquez and Vermeer. Each of the artworks was chosen for its conceptual and/or aesthetic properties that show a fascination and experimentation with reflection and reflectivity. Thus, each of the examples is representative of the speculum. All three artists have a relation to the use of the mirror in their artworks that may have inspired Engels's fascination with the symbolic use of

the mirror in his set designs, as he himself studied art history at the University of Pretoria.

Following on this section, I discuss a few later works by artists who were directly and indirectly influenced by Wagner's ideas of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and German folklore in his operas. These artists are among those that brought about change in the world of fine arts, which would later evolve into Modernism; this movement naturally had an impact on theatre design.

An early example of an artist who inserted his own likeness in portraits is Jan van Eyck who used the reflection in a mirror to paint his own presence between 1390 and 1441. Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (Figure 59) from 1434 signifies an infinite duality with the subjects in the foreground reflected in the vanishing point. Their hands are joined in a possible suggestion of infinite love and fulfilment. Engels's original mirror sidewalls with the mirrored floor panels for *Tristan und Isolde* would have created a similar suggestion of infinite duality, with the lovers holding hands while standing on the mirror in the floor in Act I of the opera. In the centre of Van Eyck's painting is a convex mirror with a reflection of the room. Van Eyck placed himself at the exact centre of this mirror at the precise vanishing point with a child next to him who is said to have been a witness to the marriage. By placing himself in the middle of the vanishing point, Van Eck signifies infinity. Melchior-Bonnet (2003:122) refers to the placement of this miniscule figure in comparison with the very large figures in the front as *mise en abîme*³⁵. In *Tristan und Isolde* Engels made similar use of this void, by placing the two lovers at the centre of the vanishing point during all the scenes of the lovers' tryst.

Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* and its infinite duality lead me to the painting that mystified Velázquez (1618-1660), *Las Meninas* (Figure 60) and his work of art that lead to the famous book of Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1970) and his essay *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* (1984). Foucault's uses the mirror as metaphor for the reality and unreality and its relation to representation(1984:25). *Las Meninas* makes out a key

³⁵ *Mise en abîme* means to place in a void (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:122).

component of his study, as it is shrouded in mystery by its juxtaposition between the world of the utopia and heterotopia. For this study it is of particular importance that the complex relationship between the viewer and the artwork must be discussed. In the case of Engels's *Tristan und Isolde* this relation and its influence on the representation of the utopia seen in the mirror by Tristan and Isolde leads to a better understanding of how the mirror functions materially and symbolically.

I recognise the importance of Foucault's extended works on subjects pertaining the mirror as a motif in *The Order of Things* (1970) and *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* (1984:22-27). I do think by adding these as extended discussions on the mirror as a motif in this paper is not critical, although they have to be discussed briefly and their relation to this research paper tested. As I have reflected on closely related concepts like the *Phenomenon* and the *Noumenon* that I used for my research pertaining to the use of the mirror in *Tristan und Isolde*, utopias and heterotopias deserve attention in the following section. I do think that *The Order of Things* pose the question about the period's episteme during which the production was staged that I will like to briefly address together with *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* and their relation to Engels' designs.

It is clear that, even a few hundred years after Velázquez' painting of *Las Meninas* (Figure 60) was unveiled, the role of the mirror as a portal between reality and utopian vision hadn't changed significantly at all. Thus the use of the mirror as a motif in *Tristan und Isolde* (1985) can be ruled out as an episteme of the period in relation to our experience of the current day, as our current perception of the reflection in the mirror seemingly does not differ greatly from the year 1985. In the following paragraph I will briefly address the role of the utopia and heterotopia in *Las Meninas* (1656) and its possible influence on Engels' own perception of the mirror as a motif.

4.2.1.1 Las Meninas and The Order of Things

Las Meninas (1656) by Velázquez (1618-1660) (Figure 60) is probably one of the most important examples of painting with the aid of a mirror as it pushes optical subtleties to their limits (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:168). This seventeenth century portrait of the maids of honour of the infant Margaret Theresa of Spain shows a complex relationship of the subjects with the viewer. The main reason for the complexity is the question of reality and illusion, as the relation of the viewer to the painting is always questioned. The use of mirrors in the composition of the painting raises some questions, such as whether the painting shows the Infant Margaret Theresa posing with her entourage, or whether it shows them in relation to another portrait of the royal couple being painted, as seen reflected in the mirror in the background.

According to Gombrich (1957:306), Velázquez relied on an intricate relation between the visual and vision to create this portrait. Velázquez' composition for *Las Meninas* corresponds with Johan Engels's concept for *Tristan und Isolde*, as Engels also used mirrors to create an intentional illusion, and to link the figures in the illusion conceptually. Velázquez intentionally placed the reflection of the royal couple in a mirror in the background in the vanishing point whereas Engels made use of this same principle to make the two lovers in *Tristan und Isolde* visually renounce their surroundings when yearning for the *Noumenon* and entering this utopian world.

The utopia seen by both Tristan and Isolde in the mirrors on stage in Engels's design for the production reflects this relation between the visual and vision and also questions its true representation. It plays a similar role as Schopenhauer's *Noumenon* in a sense that the *Noumenon* is also a form of a utopian projection by Tristan and Isolde. In this way, the two lovers experience a heterotopia during the moments where they get lost in the cosmic layered space that thus create a parallel world to their own where the utopian space can be experienced and they can escape to this utopia. Velázquez shrouded his work in mystery by experimenting with this very relation between the mirror as a motif and the mirror as an ephemeral phenomenon. One can argue that this mystification of

the mirror in art led to future representations of works like Engels's *Tristan und Isolde* (1985) to utilise the mirror to accomplish this ephemeral phenomenon. It is evident that this mystification of the mirror is the key to the spectator's experience of the performance and their perception of *Tristan und Isolde's* utopia which is portrayed by the two lovers and their experience in the *Noumenon*.

Foucault writes in *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* (1984:25) that there can be a joint experience of both the utopia and heterotopia. This joint experience can according to Foucault be seen as the mirror. One can ascertain that Engels's use of the mirror in *Tristan und Isolde* created an ephemeral phenomenon of the presence of both the utopia and heterotopia in the moments where the lovers look into the mirrors.



Figure 59. *Arnolfini Portrait* by Jan van Eyck (1434) Oil on oak panel of three vertical boards



Figure 60. Velásquez, *Las Meninas* (1656) Oil on canvas

Jan Vermeer (1632-1675) used mirrors and reflections in glass to aid the execution of paintings as well as adding an inaccessible interiority in his work to mystify the subject matter. An example of such a painting is *Girl Reading a Letter at an open Window* that was painted in 1657 (See Figure 61). This painting shows the side profile of a girl reading a letter that is obscured to the viewer. The only clue to her identity or emotion is the vague reflection of her face in the window. A further mystifying element is the drawn curtain in the foreground. Melchior-Bonnet (2003:170) refers to this image as "a mystery redoubling the mystery of yet another". In a painting titled an *Allegory of Painting*, painted between 1666 and 1667, Vermeer juxtaposes the point of view by using mirrors to paint the woman with the trumpet and himself in the same portrait. This effect was

probably achieved by using two mirrors, the bigger of which would give the greater impression of the dimensions of his workshop (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:172-173).



Figure 61. Johannes Vermeer, *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (1657) Oil on canvas

The historical context of the mirror as discussed in the previous section is relevant to this study as Engels's experience as an undergraduate student at the University of Pretoria would've lead to exposure to the history of art and symbols in art . This can be seen as a supplement to Engels's experience and encounters of the use of mirrors in set design abroad, as Engels would've understood the mirror as a motif in art from his undergraduate studies. By looking at artworks and the artistic movements following the release of Wagner's essay *The Artwork of the Future*, one can contextualise the impact of his compositions on the world of art. The paintings in the following section do not depict mirrors, although they mirror the character's in scenes from different Wagnerian

operas and in artworks what can be seen as a utopian vision of the artists in their respective worlds and episteme.

4.2.2 The Art of Revolution

Richard Wagner published his essays *Art and Revolution* and the *Artwork of the Future* in 1849. In both essays, Wagner coined his aesthetic philosophy, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and a fellowship of all the different forms of art to create the artwork of the future, which in his eyes would be the musical drama. Wagner's ideas for the staging of this drama only evolved as the arts movements Symbolism and Naturalism started acting against pictorial Realism. However, in Wagner's lifetime pictorial Realism was still at the order of the day in the staging of his works, although he condemned it. Wagner despised grandiose opera and its excessive pictorial Realism that he believed distracted from the most important aspect of opera, namely the drama.

Pictorial Realism like that of Wagner's early staging was the impetus for famous artists like Ferdinand Leeke (Salmi 2005), who was greatly inspired and was eventually commissioned in 1889 by Siegfried Wagner, Wagner's son to create works inspired by ten Wagnerian operas (See Figure 62). These paintings were reproduced in poster form in 1899 and were among the first six-colour photogravure processed prints to be reproduced in the world. Although these prints were revolutionary in implementing the newly developed printing method, it is evident that they propagated the association of Wagnerian operas with pictorial Realism and illusion. Their reproduction of Wagnerian characters, which were also sold in the form of sweet wrappings, created a cult of Wagner followers who were fascinated by the resurrected characters from German folklore.



Figure 62. Ferdinand Leeke, *Tristan und Isolde* (1889) Photogravure print

When King Ludwig II of Bavaria commissioned the building of the Neuschwanstein Castle that was roughly based on the plans of the Nuremburg Castle, he also commissioned August Spiess (See Figure 63) to paint scenes based on Wagner's operas in several rooms (Carnegy 2006:55). The castle itself was designed by the set designer Christian Jank, and executed and adapted by the architect Eduard Riedel. While Neuschwanstein is regarded as one of the best examples of European historicism, one can speculate that the paintings from Wagner's operas romanticised the folklore in the operas and used it to situate the replica of an ancient castle in a historical framework (Carnegy 2006:55).



Figure 63. August Spiess, *Tristan und Isolde* (1881) Neuschwanstein

Although rarely written about, Wagner's *Art and Revolution* was the *tour de force* behind the evolvement of Romantic art in Europe in the Modernism of the twentieth century. Wagner even boasted to the composer Franz Liszt in a letter before his death, that he was trying to scare people off by the start of what he referred to as cultural terrorism. Wagner's part in the Dresden revolution of 1849 forced him to live in exile; it was one of the few movements that he played a silent part in (Vazsonyi 2008:196). Another such movement started in Russia, and was referred to as the *Proletkult*. It started with an uprising in the working class, spread to the philosophers and artists, and manifested itself in both drama and music. According to Wagner, art made the strong fair man beautiful, while revolution made him strong. In a sense, this writing by Wagner can be seen as a form of propaganda, and shows why Wagner became a key figure in ideologies held by both the Third Reich as well as Adolf Hitler (Vazsonyi 2008:197).

An interesting relationship developed between *Raumkunst*³⁶ and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* during the fourteenth and seventeenth Vienna Secession in 1903 (Shirley 2014:1360). In 1846, Wagner conducted Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in Dresden where he coined the words "Absolute Music" in the programme (Vazsonyi 2008:195). At this pivotal point

³⁶ Raumkunst was a coin termed for the Beethoven exhibition of 1902 by the Vienna Secession.

in Wagner's life, he became a great inspiration to artists of the later Vienna Secession with his *Gesamtkunstwerk*³⁷ (Wolfman 2013). The *Gesamtkunstwerk* would be the inspiration for a term coined *Raumkunst* where artists of the Secession built a pavilion for the display of their artworks (Shirley 2014:1361). These spaces were more than mere galleries, but temples to the art and ideas that they displayed. One can argue that this was an early form of installation art, as all the artworks were integrated into the space in such a fashion that they integrated completely with the architecture and gave meaning to the entire space (Baker 2013 269-270).

One should also note that *Raumkunst* also represents the start of interdisciplinary cohesion, as from this point onwards Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* became a partial reality, where different worlds of differing disciplines were intimately informed by one another and their theories (Wolfman 2013). Such a relationship is visible between Alfred Roller and Gustav Mahler in their conversations in a Viennese café about the staging of a modern *Tristan und Isolde* with Roller showing ideas of the set on the café tablecloth (Shirley 2014:1360). Although these preceded the first staging with Appia's *Tristan und Isolde* designs, it was the first major breakthrough to move from the Austro-German tradition to the Modernism of the twentieth century. It is also an interesting link between visual arts and theatre, as Roller was a graphic artist and taught drawing at the Vienna University of Applied Arts (*Kunstgewerbeschule*). Roller was one of the co-founders of the Vienna Secession, designed its posters, decided on the layout of the early exhibitions and subsequently succeeded Carl Moll as Secession president in 1902. This artist-turned-scenic-designer would thus draw his inspiration from the art movements in Vienna at that time, and from the writings of the new *tour de force* in theatre design, Adolphe Appia (Shirley 2014:1365).

Gustav Klimt's (1862-1918) Beethoven Frieze entitled *Ode to Joy* was a direct response to the performance conducted by Wagner and the sense of absolute music. It marks a movement embarking on the journey to a utopian vision of a socially constructed world

³⁷ Wagner's influence resonated in a number of artists of the Secession, including Max Klinger, Gustav Klimt and one of very few female artists without voting rights, Elena Luksch-Makowsky.

(Karnes 2013:4). Klimt's *Ode to Joy* (Figure 64) is closely linked to Klinger's Beethoven statue (Figure 65) as it was located in the entrance hall of the exhibition space and in the catalogue it was mentioned "the arts lead us to the Ideal Kingdom" (Karnes 2013:9). This Ideal Kingdom is a utopian vision that forms the very critical link between Romanticism and Modernism, a utopia Wagner strived after in his *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and an inspired vision also fuelled by the Arts and Crafts movement led by William Morris in the United Kingdom. Karnes (2013:4) argues that Klimt and Klinger shared a similar utopian vision, where Klimt wanted to preserve the essence of the Will of Schopenhauer with Wagner's vision of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.



Figure 64. Gustav Klimt, *Ode to Joy* (1902) Casein colours on ground stucco with a semi-precious stone inlay and reed base



Figure 65. *Beethoven Monument*. Polychrome statue (1902)

A similar response as that of Klimt came from Max Klinger (1857-1920) with his *Brahms-Phantasie* (Figure 66), to which Brahms himself reacted, "I can see the music ... it seems the music continues to resonate in the infinite and thus expresses all I meant" (Heran 2001). Although in service of the music of Brahms, one can say that the engravings by Klinger and his own inspiration by Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* show an effort to transcend art principles in the quest for a utopia. Klinger, however, did not share Wagner's quasi-socialist trappings in which he framed his *Gesamtkunstwerk* theory (Karnes 2013:3).



Figure 66. *Opus XII Brahms-Phantasie: The Rape of Prometheus* (1984) Engraving by Max Klinger

Elena Luksch-Makowsky's (1878-1965) (Johnson 2012:81) contact with Richard Wagner's work and ideas during the Vienna Secession and with Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov in Russia suggests her inspiration by folk tales. In her case, specifically Russian folk tales, which one can see depicted in some of her work like the *Underwater Nymphs* and *Time* (Figure 67) that was exhibited during the fourteenth Vienna Secession. What makes Luksch-Makowsky a particular interest is her role in explaining why the Secession's ideals were unsagacious (Johnson 2012:81). The Secession artists chose a distinct few of their contacts to exhibit in this utopian ideal, whereas other artists in Vienna had to stand in line to exhibit. One can argue that the downfall of the Secession after 1902 with the closing was thus owing to the fact that it did not co-exist with the outside art world, but was in fact a confined utopia that shared only the interests of the select few who were invited to exhibit. Klinger who stated that he was against the quasi-socialist trappings of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* as mentioned

earlier, framed this argument successfully in the sense that he captured the exact flaw of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*. At the end of the day, it proved to be in service of a single idea, which in Wagner's world would be the musical drama (Wolfman 2013). When taken out of this context, it would only be in service of the concept that it was used for, and in the case of the Vienna Secession, it thus worked ideally for artists sharing the same concept in this installation.

Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* had a profound impact on Rimsky-Korsakov who was greatly influenced by the Ring Cycle (Johnson 2012:82). According to Bartlett (1995:111) in *Wagner and Russia*, Russia and Germany had shared the mutual striving after religious and myth-based art. After an appeal by the composer Tchaikovsky to bring more Wagnerian music to Russia, Wagner himself came and conducted extracts from works that he was still busy composing, mostly without singers. It was here that the *Liebestod* from *Tristan und Isolde* made its debut, and it seems Wagnerian music caught on to Russians as both Russian and German nationals harboured the same depth of feeling, which one can argue most probably inspired such a unity of interests in musical dramas (Johnson 2012:82).



Figure 67. *Time panel* (Now destroyed) 1902 Elena Luksch-Makowsky.

Wagner befriended a circle of philosophers and artists during the Dresden revolution. A prominent figure who inspired Wagner's thinking greatly was the architect Gottfried Semper.

The use of Wagner's work for propaganda after his death turned the romantic picture of German nationalism once painted by artists like Leeke and Spiess into a tool used to propagate nationalism. Wagner's *Zeitgeist* was largely formed by the Apollonian and Dionysian spirit regarding art as a higher form of transcendence as he believed that the ancient Greeks found the ultimate form of art that was lost in history because of modernisation. Modernisation was something Wagner spoke out against strongly, although the very essence of the Bayreuth Festival theatre relied on it (Baker 2013:213). It was in fact also the first theatre in the world to be fitted with electrical light when designers like Roller displayed the important role lighting played in portraying different emotions, settings and their atmosphere (Baker 2013:273). The once Austro-German tradition of romanticising characters was seemingly indirectly transformed by

Wagner's presence in conducting Beethoven in Vienna, which subsequently led to his *Gesamtkunstwerk* inspiring the art of this movement. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the composer himself thus influenced what can be regarded as a mirror reflecting a new ideal for theatre.

Shirley (2014:1363) mentions in *Staging the Secession* that Adolphe Appia argued for a theatre, not for Illusion (*Illusionsbühne*), but one for suggestion (*Andeutungsbühne*). For successful suggestion on the stage, there needs to be a form of a visual mediation that can help the spectator to become immersed in the work on stage. This, according to Shirley (2014:1363), means exploiting the spectator's imagination by the suggestion of a space, rather than limiting it with literally implied space. The next section discusses the use of the mirror as a mediatory entity in Modernism and attempts to apply it to the use of mirrors in Engels's designs in *Tristan und Isolde* (1985).

4.2.3 The mirror as the mediatory entity in Modernism

The relation of objects to and the role of the spectator's gaze where the mirror is present, are important in the discourse as Engels used it for building his concept. According to Melchior-Bonnet (2003:111), Saint Augustine's work encompasses three motifs, namely the theme of analogy, the principle of imitation and the search for moral enrichment through knowledge. The *speculum* was linked to the word *speculate* by Saint Thomas Aquinas in *Somme II*. Aquinas writes, "To see something by the means of a mirror is to see a cause in its effect wherein its likeness is reflected. From this we see that *speculation* leads back to mediation" (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:113-114). Later in this study, I discuss the mirror as a *speculum* of the unconscious.

The *False Mirror* (See Figure 68) by René Magritte (1898-1967) is one of the most iconic surrealist paintings, and even though its subject matter is minimal, its transcendent images represent surrealist art and the position of the spectator's gaze (1985:83-84). This iris filled with a circular piece of the sky poses a challenge to the

viewer, since the artist wanted to trigger his/her unconscious mind. Magritte thus creates an illusion that suggests a reflection gaze returned to the subject in the painting who is the object of the gaze by the spectator. This painting is an important example of understanding the spectator's position when looking at a singer on the stage looking into a mirror. It is thus a relevant addition to this study to show the progression of the understanding of mirror reflection and its relation to the spectator in the arts (1985:83-84). Such an understanding is critical when looking at Engels's use of the mirror as a design motif, as it portrays the complicated relation of the viewer with a mirrored image that either positions the viewer as a spectator, or as a voyeur witnessing a gaze.

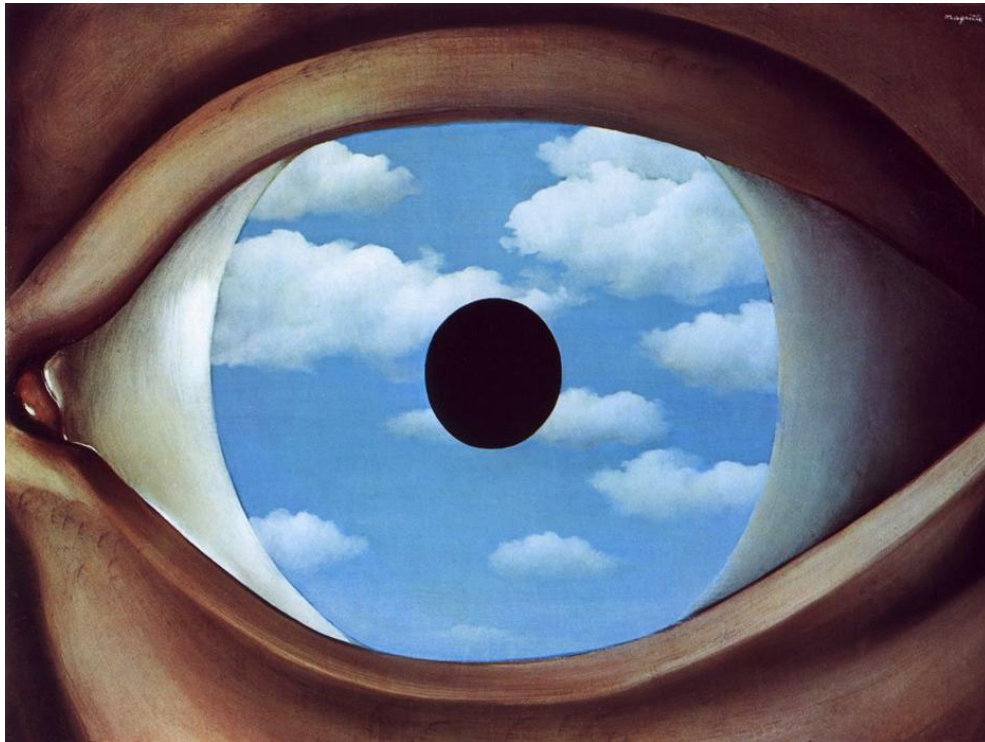


Figure 68. *False Mirror* by René Magritte (1928) Oil painting

The influences of visual culture in Modernism at the time when *Tristan und Isolde* was conceived is very appropriate to this study to find the relation between development and abstraction, which evidently influenced design in theatre (Baker 2013: 257). Wagner's influence led to a new understanding of collaborative art, and gave musical drama a stage where it could be appreciated in its absolute form, without excess and with sensible staging. Modernism eventually trickled down to scenic designers like Adolphe

Appia, who transformed the nature of conventional staging and started a new form of Wagnerian opera scenic design that would later be the preferred style used by Richard Wagner's grandson Wolfgang Wagner to stage his musical dramas at Bayreuth (Baker 2013: 257). This form of scenic design became the premise of most designers of Wagnerian dramas until the present and is still evident in the stagings at the Bayreuth Festival (Engels 2013).

4.3 The speculum of the unconscious

4.3.1 *Lacan and the psychological reflection*

The story of Narcissus is found in book three of *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, which was written in 8 A.D. The narrative can be read as a tale of two mirrors. The first is the embodiment of the nymph who happens to be named Echo; she falls in love with Narcissus (1968:215-217). When Narcissus rejects her and chases her away, the goddess Nemesis lures him to a dark pond where he becomes entranced by his own reflection (the second mirror). Narcissus eventually commits suicide when he finds that this self-love will never be reciprocated. Narcissus' intense love for his own reflection in a dark pool has led to many debates in history. Many of these religious debates from the twelfth century served as a representation of Narcissus, or any man for that fact, who ignores his divine aspects and becomes idolatrous (1968:215-217).

In *The Narcissus Theme in Western European Literature up to the Early 19th Century*, Louise Vinge (1968:215-217) writes that the transgression of Narcissus originates from an ignorance of the soul and godliness. Lauding his own corporeal form, true beauty was neglected in order to follow reflection and thus Narcissus condemned himself to an assimilation with a simulacrum that would never fulfil the aspirations of his soul (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:112). Narcissus thus causes a conflict between subjectivity and Individualism, and according to Nicklas Johansson (2012:7), problematizes the mirror as a medium. One can assume that the subjectivity encountered by Narcissus is that of Echo (the first mirror of his true beauty), which also corresponds to Lacan's first mirror as the gaze of the mother to her infant.

Consequently, the conflict of Individualism can be described as Narcissus' self-love as he becomes entranced by his own reflection. This also closely corresponds to the second mirror mentioned by Lacan (Roudinesco 1999:111), which is the actual mirror that the infant is entranced by until he recognises and grasps his own reflection as his own likeness.

The ego, according to Jacques Lacan (Roudinesco 1999:111), is developed over a period. Lacan refers to the specular images of an infant in a mirror. The infant, according to Lacan, is born without a notion of the self. The first of two mirror images the infant encounters is the gaze of his mother, and the second is the mirror image of the infant seeing his own reflection in the mirror and slowly grasping the image as a manifestation of the self. This image takes time to become apparent to the infant as his own self. The mirror image thus no longer resembles the mirror or a stage, but becomes a psychological encounter or an ontological operation during which the subject becomes aware of his semblance or likeness, making it formative of the function of the "I" (Roudinesco 1999:111). Ironically, Socrates called the mirror self-constructive, whereas it featured in mythology as self-destructive. Socrates said that seeing one's own likeness would guide one through life, but also mentioned the imminent corruption of this image, should it be used for some perverted nature to multiply objects of lust (Melchior-Bonnet 2003:106).

Patrick and Kelly Fuery (2003:22) identify references to the Baroque period in Lacan's life. The neologism in Lacan's work led them to believe that the mirror stage is a conception inspired by the Baroque, as it was during the Baroque that locating the spectator was created in art, with depth of field, perspective and an overall feeling of realism. Thus the speculum was born, with the placement of the subject in such a manner that the sense of depth of a room can be optimally experienced. It is also during this period that the gaze of the spectator started functioning as a reflection of the spectator's own expectations. In Baroque art the spectator's gaze returns to him, involving the spectator in becoming the Speculum (Fuery 2003:22-24, 27).

In *Performance Design* (2008:35), Arnold Aronson suggests that the dimming of the auditorium lights, which Wagner started in 1869 with the opening of *Das Rheingold* in Munich, was the pivotal point in resolving the theatrical exchange of the gaze.

According to Aronson the material space of the auditorium was eradicated. Although Aronson (2008:35) refers to modern virtual reality in his next argument, one cannot help but to link virtual reality with the use of a mirror. Aronson suggests that virtual reality is the logical end of Wagnerian operas and that it brought about the return of the gaze to the spectator. I want to suggest that the availability of mirrors, which pre-dates virtual reality by more than 200 years, is responsible for the return of the gaze as it was introduced to manifest a psychological link between the viewer and the stage in modernist theatre. This would mean that Engels's use of the mirror in the floor for both Act I and Act II of *Tristan und Isolde* altered the exchange of the gaze between the audience and the singers. Instead of having mirror walls that would return and multiply the gaze of the spectator, Engels created a personal exchange between Tristan and Isolde, where the spectator merely became the voyeur of a gaze between two lovers in an endless space.

The next section links the exchange of Tristan and Isolde through the mirror in the floor to the mirror motif in which imaginary projection of the spectator and the singers creates an intimate link between the gaze of the spectator, the actors and the return of the singers' gaze in the mirror.

4.4 *Tristan und Isolde* and the mirror motif

According to Melchior-Bonnet (2003:174), "the mirror acts more or less like a theatrical stage on which each person creates himself from an imaginary projection, from social and aesthetic models and from an appearance that all reciprocally sustain each other. Without this counterbalance the image of the self grows unchecked".

In the mirror image becoming identity incarnate, one can ascertain that seeing the performer or performers on the stage studying their own image in a mirror or reflection, reciprocates their existence in the tangible world and makes their stories seemingly non-fictional. Thus, the mirror can be used successfully as a directorial tool to immerse the audience in the fictional character and dialogue on the stage, and as previously suggested, to signify duality or infinity. The Artistic director of Welsh National Opera, David Pountney (2016) underscores the spatial magnitude that a mirror contributes to the stage in an interview. Pountney (2016) states that Wagner operas demand an epic spatial feeling, and to expand the sense of space, an uncluttered stage is needed; the use of mirrors can contribute greatly to expanding the visual field. Mirror walls can be used to reflect the action on a stage or duplicate the scenery and actors/singers. The use of mirrors on the floor can also help to eliminate the horizontal line upstage, and thus integrate the scenery into the visual landscape.

The objective in traditional theatre is to reduce glare and reflectivity on reflective items, like glass and mirrors, by the use of a light coat of paint added like mist to props, windows and mirrors. By reducing the reflectivity of objects, the designer maintains the fourth wall, which is the proscenium opening through which the audience sees the action. By intentionally reflecting the auditorium, the designer reminds patrons of the existence of this wall, and therefore the relationship with the piece on stage can change dramatically. It is therefore important that a designer is cautious when clear mirrors are used. In the case of designers like Josef Svoboda, Ralph Koltai, Gunther Schneider-Siemssen as well as Johan Engels, the mirrors are placed at such an angle that they contribute to the design concept, rather than blinding audience members or disrupting the immersion of the spectator.

There are, however, instances when a director wants to break down the fourth wall of the stage (the proscenium or imaginary wall). By having mirrors reflecting the audience, this instant removal of the psychological fourth wall is possible. Wagner, however, wanted to immerse the audience fully by having a double proscenium to remind them of

the two different walls (Carnegy 2006). Consequently, an arena theatre will never be truthful to Wagner's opera dramas.

Tristan und Isolde is often referred to as an opera about the cosmic journey of two lovers (Engels, personal communication 2014). The essence of a cosmic journey lies in the will to explore and live beyond just the tangible world, to be part of the *Phenomenon*. This theme of escapism places *Tristan und Isolde* firmly in the genre of Romantic operas, although the music lends itself to early modernism, thus making it the earliest modern opera. *Tristan und Isolde* starts on board a ship on its way to Cornwall, where Isolde will marry her betrothed, King Marke. One can speculate that this voyage not only represents a physical journey, but the preparation of the stage for Tristan and Isolde's cosmic journey after drinking the potion. Wagner happened to compose the scenes for the lovers' tryst to take place at late dusk or at night, while harsh reality befalls the two lovers as soon as the sun rises. Here dark and light, and of course night and day are used to resemble two different worlds (Engels, personal communication 2014). One can thus further speculate that the tryst takes place under the night sky; the two lovers are surrounded by the stars, and yearn for this *Noumenon* until reality rules as soon as the sun rises.

Tristan und Isolde's concept thus allows conceptual interpretations such as the use of mirrors to resemble the reminder of the self, or a reminder of reality, which penetrates the lovers' duets during moments of unsure trembling. The mirrors can also represent the existence of an ethereal space, as the two lovers are confronted with the world of Will and the World of Idea, and the choice between love and duty. These moments occur repeatedly in both individual arias and duets by Tristan and Isolde, and in Act I after the drinking of the potion. A further opportunity that presents itself for the use of mirrors is the drinking of the potion in Act I. Here a uni-directional gaze is present, as described by Fuery (2003:27) as a transition between the egocentric self in the world of pleasure and the realm of the symbolic, signifier and order. By drinking the potion, the two lovers essentially become one by means of this gaze, and from there on become inseparable. This is the key moment that justifies the use of mirrors in the scenic design

to represent this unity. The two lovers can be placed between or on top of a mirror. Thus, the analogy of the mirror itself and the mirrored image will be that the mirror symbolising the passing from the inner primitive needs to a state of reason, and the mirrored image the state of reason that passes to the spiritual realm. One can speculate that this spiritual realm represents the *Phenomenon* of Schopenhauer and the state of reason, the *Noumenon*.

Act II of *Tristan und Isolde* creates an apt opportunity as well for the use of mirrors. Michael Steen (2013:16) writes that reality is a parallel world, whereas eternity is where we all belong. Steen uses the analogy of the mirror to explain night and day in *Tristan und Isolde*. According to him, reality is the side of the mirror that we see, which is only a temporary manifestation. Eternity is the side that is not reflective, thus being the unconscious. The two sides of the mirror are inseparable, and pertain to the love and duty that are the two factors that end up destroying the two lovers and leading to their final transfiguration into eternity at the end of Act III (Steen 2013:16).

At the end of Act III, during Isolde's transfiguration, she sees Tristan waiting for her; she hears him, feels his touch, smells his sweet breath and tastes his lips. John Murray (1974:211) refers to the mirror as the sign of truth, self-knowledge and sight, as one of the five senses. One can argue that the use of mirrors in Engels's design has now reached the culminating point where Isolde passes from one realm to another, with the duality of the mirror reflection finally becoming one, thereby overcoming not only sight but also all her senses. The final and most well-known aria from *Tristan und Isolde*, namely *Mild und leise*, is the point of transfiguration, where Isolde sees Tristan in eternity, becomes one with her senses, and sinks gently after the words, "To drown, to founder, unconscious, utmost rapture". The use of the mirror as a motif in Engels's designs thus played a critical part in the suggestion of Isolde's final transfiguration, as the yearning for the noumenal space in the mirror now becomes eternal bliss.

I want to suggest that Isolde's transfiguration in Engels's interpretation of the 1985 staging is the beginning of a process that already emerged in Act I and Act II. This

process was initiated by the gaze in the mirror in the floor of the ship and the floor of the love nest, transporting the two lovers to a different realm and Act III being the penultimate moment of this action. Tristan's impending death is already symbolised by the extinguishing of the torch in Act II, as it is a metaphor for death. By using mirrors in Act I and II for the exchange of Tristan and Isolde's personal gaze, Engels made visible to the audience the portal to another dimension for the two lovers, thus helping with the added tension and depth of Tristan and Isolde's yearning for the noumenal space and giving means to the final transfiguration of Isolde in Act III. I want to underscore the fact that Isolde's figurative drowning in this space was successfully achieved by the solar eclipse in Engels's staging. A solar eclipse, according to Chetwynd (1982:387) often represents a woman's subconscious when it represents her animus. This eclipse thus successfully signalled the beginning of Isolde's transfiguration and the return of the gaze to the spectator. Although not deliberate, it was a way to reverse the gaze from the cosmic space and to eradicate the *Noumenon* from the endless desires of the two lovers. It also settled the constant yearning for eternal love, which is resolved by the last chord in the music of *Tristan und Isolde*. The two mirrors in Engels's designs were motifs to portray this progress of the gaze, which in my view was resolved by a solar eclipse that signified the end of the transfiguration and the return of the gaze to the spectator.

Conclusion

This paper enabled a better understanding of Engels's designs for *Tristan und Isolde* (1985) and how it resonated with his final work on Wagner operas. It attempted to prove that Engels's undergraduate studies at the University of Pretoria and his industry experience enabled his philosophical approach to interpreting Wagner's compositions and to portray it through the use of mirrors in his designs. By positioning Engels within a historical framework of South African theatre and theatre design in particular, the influences of early set and costume designers during his training at PACT proved to be a point of departure for his whole *oeuvre* until his late years. *Tristan und Isolde* can be seen as a looking glass for the interpretation of Engels's later work; his design motif prove to be in unison with that of this early PACT production and therefore mirror his signature approach to set and costume design. This study will hopefully motivate further research on South African theatre design, as Johan was among a number of very influential figures that shaped theatre in the days of PACT.

The *Tristan chord* is the first chord in the composition of *Tristan und Isolde* and occurs during the exact moment of the descent of the first notes of the cellos that are mirrored by the start of a rising melody on the oboes. This chord is regarded by many scholars as the most important chord in Western music and marks the profound impact of Richard Wagner's work on music during the birth of Modernism (Burnham & Jesinghausen 2010:109). The chord creates a dissonance that is not resolved until the end of Isolde's transfiguration, thus creating constant tension that set the stage for this musical drama. The profound nature of this composition inspired Johan Engels to design a set that would reflect the constant longing for resolution between the two lovers, that featured as an invisible two-way mirror between the composer's music, the singer's drama on stage and the audience. By using mirrors, Engels successfully created a link between two worlds that expressed ideas of Schopenhauer's *Phenomenon* and *Noumenon* and the power of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and thus effectively rendered a philosophical insight into Wagner's musical expression.

Engels, who after his death became known as a designer *par excellence* of the staging of Wagnerian works, made a lasting impression on the evolving South African theatre scene with his designs for *Tristan und Isolde*. It is therefore possible to speculate that this impact will also be realised by his later designs for the *Ring Cycle* at the Chicago Lyric Opera, which opens in 2018, a year after the submission of this study.

I have found that Engels's use of mirrors successfully translated Wagner's idea of a cosmic journey of two lovers through using the gaze to transport them between the *Noumenon* and *Phenomenon*. By using two strategically placed mirrors, this musical drama was transformed into the psychological realm of the forbidden love of Tristan and Isolde. Engels's later work clearly drew from this close understanding of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* and inspired both his *Parsifal* (2014) and probably also the forthcoming *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (2018) in Chicago.

The limitations of this study were mainly brought on by the passing of both Johan Engels and Neels Hansen during the course of this study. Additional information had to be obtained from an array of extra sources which also had to be interviewed. Unfortunately, the scope of this study did not allow further writing on Engels's career abroad, as new information surfaced in these interviews that could lead to a Doctoral study. Some of the limitations will be addressed in the exhibition catalogue although further research on these new topics could not be incorporated under this theme. Engels's personal Archives recently moved to the University of Wales where after digitization it will be easier to conduct further research on the designer and his work.

This study will contribute to the field of South African theatre history and theatre design that is rarely written about. The South African State Theatre archives are moving to Unisa in the year of the completion of this study and it will thus hopefully inspire similar research topics. This may lead to the preservation of this very specialised field of knowledge that was passed down from amateur players, to theatre organisations and eventually to the arts councils.

Isolde's transfiguration marks possible rebirth in a different form as the slender crescent visible signifies a change as it is the start of a solar eclipse (Figure 69); one could draw the conclusion that it resembles the change in Engels's design style in 1985, as this was his first truly modern design and the most successful up to that time. His influence on theatre locally and abroad is mirrored in his past success, and will remain a lasting force in future opera design.

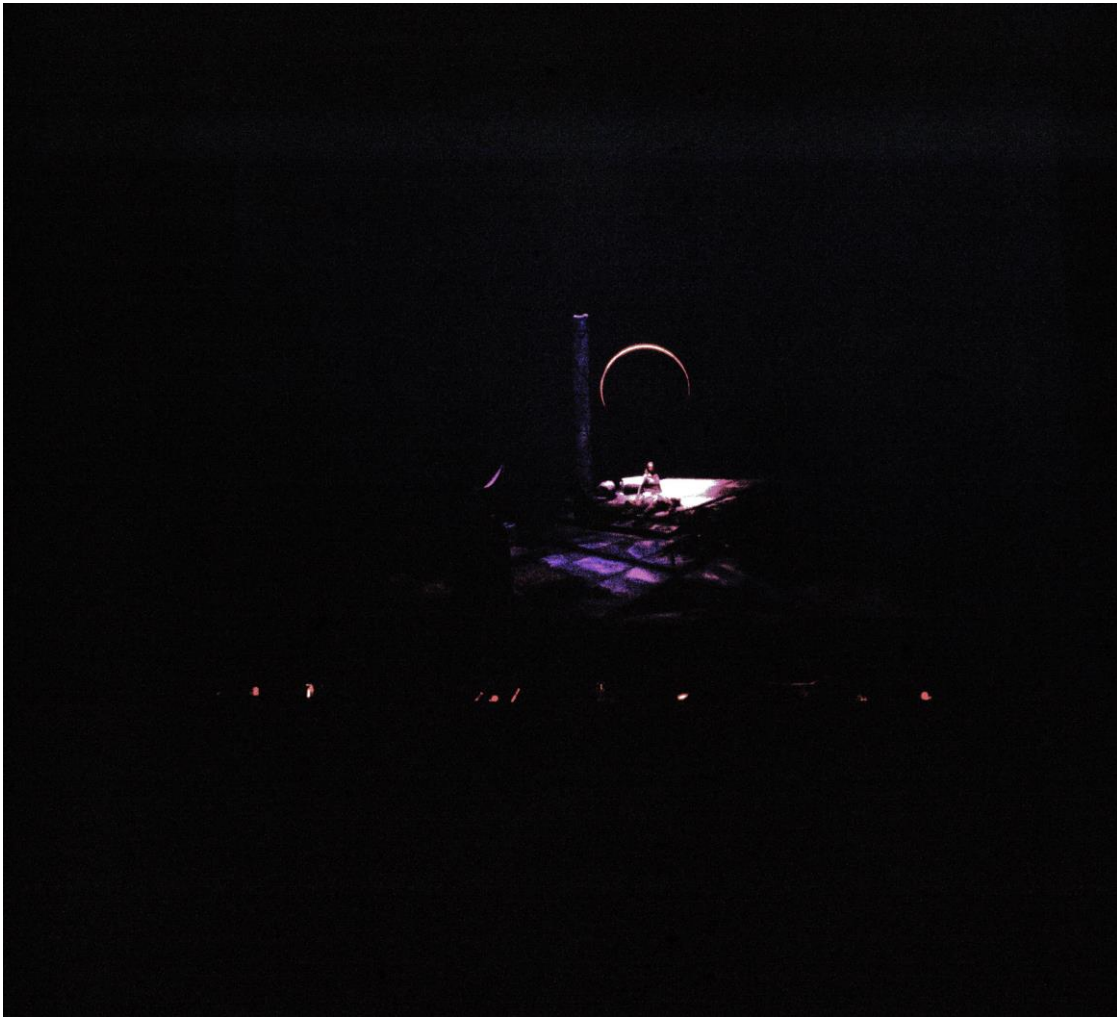


Figure 69. Isolde's transfiguration, *Tristan und Isolde* (1985) Photograph by Nan Melville (State Theatre Archives)

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