

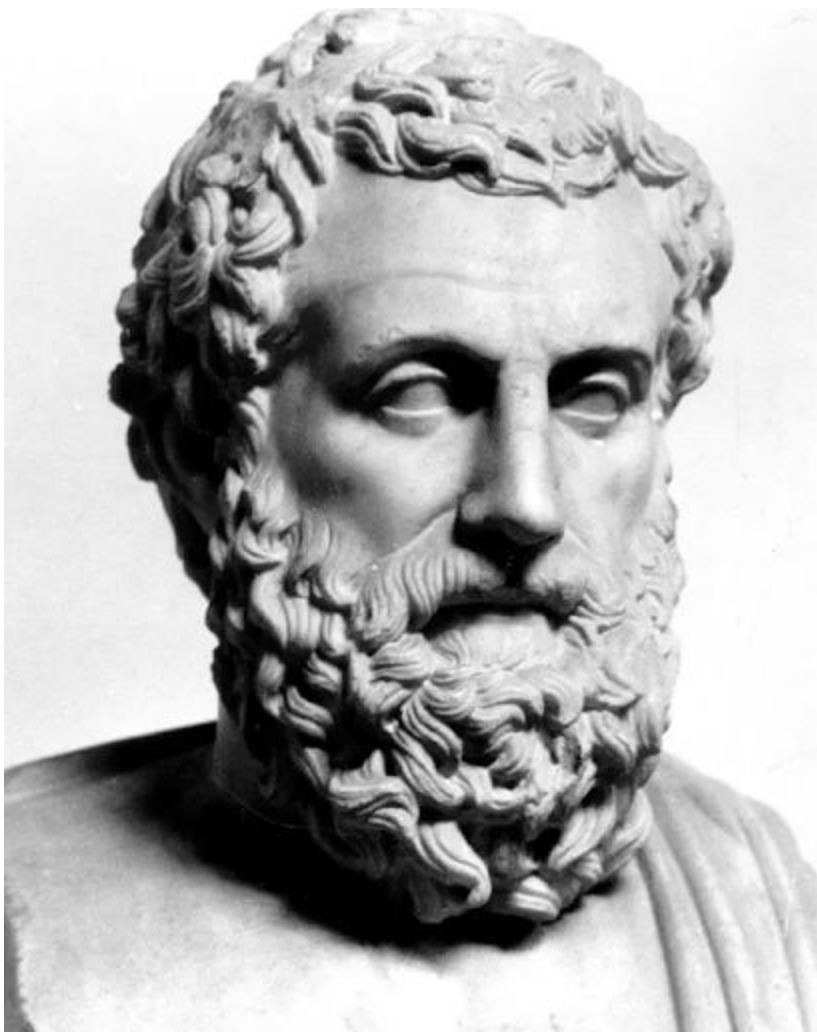
Spectacle: The Largest Character on Stage

In a recent class, our professor asked us to recall a time we were left speechless after a theatrical performance. I immediately reflected on when I first saw Nick Stafford's 2007 play *Warhorse*.



Warhorse is the story of a horse named Joey that was raised by a young boy, Albert, in southern England. When Joey is conscripted into service during World War One Albert lies about his age to go across the channel into France to find his beloved horse. The overwhelming visual storytelling left me unable to speak after a single act. The incredible puppetry created by The Handspring Puppet company alongside Rae Smith's scenic and costume design created a moment of theatre that will always live with me. Other students shared their experiences as well, including a recent trip to see Jack Thorne's *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, and a common thread emerged, Spectacle. Most of the impactful theatre memories that were shared were rooted in performances that relied heavily on breathtaking theatrical spectacle. This leads me to question the role of Spectacle in the lasting impression performances leave on their audience.

Since the earliest and most formative moments of theatre as an art form, Spectacle has been recognized as an important and vital component to the successful art of storytelling.



When discussing tragedy in the *Poetics* Aristotle said “The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.” It seems that Aristotle diminishes the importance of spectacle, not only by listing it last in his order of importance but by stating that the tragedy would be just as powerful without its presence. Greek tragedy was not devoid of spectacle and some may argue it is as pivotal to its success as spectacle is to the American Musical theatre today. Perhaps he was experiencing just the text and the spectacle was not something he directly interacted with. This challenges my own personal approach and principle to creating theatre. Maybe as a young scenic designer who would just be the “Stage Machinist” to Aristotle, I take offense to this “Poet” not respecting my art.

As I tried to think of the time in a theatre I was most mesmerized I couldn't avoid landing on a single moment. About halfway through act one of *Warhorse*, there is a beautiful sequence where we watch Joey, as a shy young foal, slowly learn to trust Albert.



After a few moments of trepidation Joey begins to gallop around the stage. It was a stunning moment as I watched the small puppet move, all three puppeteers were clearly visible and not attempting to be hidden, and I became completely enraptured. It ceased to be a puppet, the way it moved and breathed, it had life and it took no suspension of disbelief for me to know it. As the small Joey circled to center stage, the three puppeteers broke the puppet apart moving quickly off the stage to be replaced by the full-sized horse puppet rearing back on its hind legs,



another marvel that stood a full head above Albert on stage. It was a stunning display of stage magic, incredible artistry with the immaculate construction of the puppets, and all backed by beautiful live music. But at that moment the spectacle itself wasn't what was taking my breath away. It was the real connection that was created so quickly to this tiny animal that we saw grow up in front of our eyes. I realized that this moment of pure spectacle *was* poetry. It wasn't based in text, but what just played out in front of my eyes was a living breathing poetic moment.

In Aristotle's world Spectacle was last on his list. He went so far as to say Spectacle was not the job of the poet. But I believe that as visual storytellers we *are poets*. Our poetry might not be the same as Aristotle was addressing, but it is no less powerful. So many memories created in the theatre are tied so closely to the spectacle we see. Whether it's the first time you see a giant chandelier coming crashing down onto the stage ,



or a two-ton gorilla roaring to life before your eyes ,



many of us as theatre artists hold a moment of grand spectacle close to our hearts. I know I will never forget losing myself in a small puppet horse as it galloped so joyously around a stage.

