Shakespeare's plays were written to be performed in the Elizabethan theatre, the characteristic features of which were developed from the raised platform built out into an inn yard, the inn galleries and stairways being made use of by the performers. The spectator was required to create the scenes from his imagination, aided only by descriptions and scant suggestions of a highly conventional sort.

Modern plays are written to be performed in the proscenium or "picture frame" theatre, in which the illusion of reality as regards the scene is created for the eye without the aid of the imagination.

It is clear that when Shakespeare's plays are presented in the modern way, in the modern theatre—that is, under conditions alien to their origin—whatever they may gain in verisimilitude, their sweep and continuity must be broken up by frequent waits made necessary by scene and costume changes, during which the interest necessarily flags and the illusion fades—there is an inevitable slowing down of pace and lowering of temperature. The modern dramatist, when he writes a play, usually provides against this by having few scenes, and by making the enforced waits conform to corresponding intervals in the action. One way out of the difficulty as regards the production of Shakespeare is to combine and re-arrange the scenes according to some such formula, but whenever this is attempted something of the clarity, the stir of life, the cosmic quality of Shakespeare leaks away.

This is so fully recognised that the other alternative is sometimes chosen—that of reproducing, in one form or another, the essential elements of the Elizabethan stage and therein giving the plays in their integrity, more or less after the manner in which they were originally produced. The objection to this is that the imagination of the average theatregoer, fed so long from the optic nerve, cannot comfortably dispense with the aids afforded by modern stage-craft, so he is apt to succumb to a disillusioned boredom, leaving the modernized Elizabethan theatre to a small band of Bardolaters.

There is a third alternative which is really a compromise between the other two; that is, between the fixity of the Elizabethan stage, which presented at all times the same features, and the flexibility afforded by the modern theatre, wherein each scene can be made to appear entirely unlike every other. If the English language lent itself with any grace to the German polysyllabic form of expression, this third alternative might be described as the modern one-set-slightly-changed-for-each-scene school, for it is the mould into which most of the more recent Shakespearean revivals have been cast. The success of this kind of solution depends of course upon the adroitness of the stage designer in the turning of his kaleidoscope, in which the same elements are made to form a variety of different patterns, each one suggestive of a given place and adapted to the performance of a given action. The outstanding advantages of this scheme or method are unity, economy, speed and directness, but in achieving unity by these means it is difficult to escape monotony; and in effecting economy, by a shade too much of thrift the idea of poverty will be suggested.
In the production of "Othello" for Mr. Walter Hampden I had really no choice between these three alternatives. To do the play "in curtains" after the Elizabethan manner, for a Belasco-fed New York audience, would be to invite disaster, because people simply wouldn't come to such a performance. To make a regular "scenic" production à la Irving or Beerbohm Tree would be no less perilous on account of the enormous initial cost. Moreover, as before stated, such a procedure would involve distortions, curtailments and arrestments in the play to which Mr. Hampden, with his deep love of Shakespeare, would never consent. These were my instructions: "The play is to be given as it is written; it must go forward without a pause, almost as rapidly as a moving picture—but we must have a real production for all that." The third alternative—some "permanent set" or unit system—was therefore not so much chosen as imposed.

Moreover, the production of "Othello," with its swift changes and many scenes, was only part of a larger and still more complicated problem—that of providing suitable scenery and accessories for a number of Shakespearean plays, so that they could be presented on successive evenings in any theatre in any city in the land—for unless Mr. Hampden was free to go on tour to supplement his New York season and to recoup possible losses, his ambition to re-create the great parts in more beautiful and more powerful projections of the great plays would be impossible of realisation. To carry about the country separate and complete productions of several Shakespearean plays is now impracticable, on account of the high cost of transportation and labour and the constricted storage and stage space in the modern theatres; therefore the thing to do would be to devise some scheme or system whereby a minimum amount of material, differently combined and arranged, could be made to do service, with the admixture of other things, in several plays, without the makeshift (to call it by its basest name) being too apparent to the audiences before whom they are presented.

This was my problem, stated thus at length in order that the solution here presented may be better understood. The effort to fulfil these various stern conditions resulted in the permanent stage setting illustrated in Fig. 1—an arrangement of curtains, borders, steps, platforms and movable wagons equipped with what might be termed "synthetic" scenery consisting of 24-foot flats with 16-foot interchangeable panels containing doors and windows of different types to be used as required. More specifically, there is a permanent inner proscenium consisting of concave vertical members covered with dark coloured drapery hanging in folds, connected at the top with a gathered and draped border of the same material. If the theatre proscenium be thought of as a picture frame, this inner proscenium would correspond in a sense to its shadow box—something which isolates the picture and gives it depth. Next behind this are two pair of travelling curtains which can be drawn wholly or partially, or looped back in the centre, making an opening of any desired width. Figs. 7 and 8 show the function which these curtains perform in the "Othello" production. Between the curtains and the platform and wagons there is a space sufficient for flats to be
space between it and the platform for ground rows and water rows which, while suggesting distant landscapes, serve also to conceal the pan-lights which illuminate the cyclorama from below.

With these elements a great variety of scenes can be built up. By bridging the space between the wagons with flats let down from above, continuous walls or variously shaped enclosures can be formed; also, arcades or colonnades, as shown in Fig. 6. By withdrawing one of the wagons out of sight and pushing the other on stage just far enough so that its end will be masked by the curtains of the inner proscenium, the effect is obtained of the angle of a great building jutting out into a street or square, as in Figs. 2 and 3. Indeed, with the addition of other elements—walls, steps, etc.—many different architectural environments may be presented, or at least suggested, while a floor cloth thrown over the stage and platform, and a ground row or two in front of the cyclorama gives the effect of a field, a heath, a sea-coast—almost any kind of an open place. Cut drops, “leg” drops, or painted and perforated curtains interposed between the cyclorama and the inner proscenium can easily be made to represent a forest.

The important thing about a Shakespearean stage scene is not its literal realism or its pictorial quality—there need be only enough of these things to suggest a place or to create a mood—it is its suitability to the dramatic action involved; a scene is good only to the extent that it provides a proper platform and background for the actors, affording them effective entrances and exits and ample room to move about. In the Elizabethan theatre there were three levels always available, the stage floor, a first gallery and a second gallery. In this modern version there are also at all times three available levels: the stage floor, the platform (which is also the first floor wagon level) and the second floor level of the wagons. This makes balcony scenes, of which there are so many in Shakespeare, a matter of no difficulty, and in ensemble scenes the actors can be arranged or grouped on different levels, composing vertically as well as horizontally. A scene does not rise until it is peopled; it should be considered less as a picture than as a picture frame. Its success will depend more than anything else upon how it displays the actors and the action; ideally, it should have no existence independent of these things, for it should never attract attention away from them. Stanislavsky says, in “My Life in Art”: “The only king and ruler of the stage is the talented actor, but alas, I cannot find for him a true