

William Archer The School for Scandal

William Archer (1856 – 1924) was a Scottish critic and playwright, and a colleague of George Bernard Shaw. His 1912 book Play-Making was one of the few texts that Mackendrick recommended to students. Here Archer describes the so-called ‘screen scene,’ which is useful in helping to explain how camera placement is so intimately related to the basic notion of dramatic irony (emphasis added).

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I propose to analyse a particular scene, not, certainly, among the loftiest in dramatic literature, but particularly suited to my purpose, inasmuch as it is familiar to every one, and at the same time full of the essential qualities of drama. I mean the Screen Scene in *The School for Scandal*.

In her ‘English Men of Letters’ volume on Sheridan, Mrs. Oliphant discusses this scene. Speaking in particular of the moment at which the screen is overturned, revealing Lady Teazle behind it, she says –

It would no doubt have been higher art could the dramatist have deceived his audience as well as the personages of the play, and made us also parties in the surprise of the discovery.

There could scarcely be a completer reversal of the truth than this “hopeless comment,” as Professor Brander Matthews has justly called it. **The whole effect of the long and highly-elaborated scene depends upon our knowledge that Lady Teazle is behind the screen.** Had the audience [...] not known that there was anybody there [...] where would have been the breathless interest which has held us through a whole series of preceding scenes? When Sir Peter reveals to Joseph his generous intentions towards his wife, the point lies in the fact that Lady Teazle overhears; and this is doubly the case when he alludes to Joseph as a suitor for the hand of Maria. So, too, with the following scene between Joseph and Charles; in itself it would be flat enough; the fact that Sir Peter is listening lends it a certain piquancy; but this is ten times multiplied by the fact that Lady Teazle, too, hears all that passes. When Joseph is called from the room by the arrival of the pretended Old Stanley, there would be no interest in his embarrassment if we believed the person behind the screen to be the French milliner. And when Sir Peter yields to the temptation to let Charles into the secret of his brother's frailty, and we feel every moment more certain that the screen will be overthrown, where would be the excitement, the tension, if we did not know who was behind it? **The real drama, in fact, passes behind the screen. It lies in the terror, humiliation, and disillusionment which we**

know to be coursing each other through Lady Teazle's soul. And all this Mrs. Oliphant would have sacrificed for a single moment of crude surprise!

Now let us hear Professor Matthews's analysis of the effect of the scene. He says:

The playgoer's interest is really not so much as to what is to happen as the way in which this event is going to affect the characters involved. He thinks it likely enough that Sir Peter will discover that Lady Teazle is paying a visit to Joseph Surface; but what he is really anxious to learn is the way the husband will take it. What will Lady Teazle have to say when she is discovered where she has no business to be? How will Sir Peter receive her excuses? What will the effect be on the future conduct of both husband and wife? These are the questions which the spectators are eager to have answered.

From *Play-Making*, William Archer (1912) (pp.166 – 8)