

## THE UNITIES

### PART A – A Quantitative Method

In drama the term refers specifically to any of three principles derived by French classicist from Aristotle's *Poetics* and requiring a play to have a single action represented as occurring in one place and within one day. They were called respectively unity of action, place and time. Aristotle's *Poetics* only underlined one unity, that unity of place. The other two unities were derived from Renaissance misreading of the text. Although these rules misrepresented Aristotle, whose comments were descriptive not prescriptive, they played a dominant role in French drama during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this part, I will be discussing the unity of time and unity of place as they are more suited to quantification.

The 'Unities' were effective in Ancient and French periodic time, but as time went on, we rarely heard these 'Unities' being practiced or observed amongst our modern critics and dramatists or maybe there is, but not as often as it used to be as in sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century where people were busy disregarding the 'Unities' all over the place. The fact is, 'The Unities' were successful for the Ancients as for the French. It was just a way to necessarily acknowledge the 'Unities.' One of first French people in the Seventeenth century who intentionally wrote a play keeping the rule of the three unities was Jean Mairet, in which the unities of time and action are discussed, and the unity of place implied (Lancaster 1929). The need to maintain the 'Unities' became a rigid dogma. 'The Unities' also influences the neoclassical drama of Spain and Italy. Mairet has examined works of the Italian dramatists and found that the secret of their success lay in their following the rules of the Ancients (Lancaster 1929). The prominence of the unities continued to dominate French drama and this became an essential characteristic of French classical tragedy.

Aristotle's unities of time, place and action deal only with tragedy. We do not know whether he highly recommended the same canon of rules for a history play. In fact, the Greek production tradition needs to be drawn when evaluating the origin and validity of Aristotle's Unities. The fact that plays were presented in the open air against a permanent architectural background and were illuminated only by sun or torchlight. I think that these characteristics, taken together, are sufficient to describe Aristotle's stress on 'The Unities.' The unity of place is straightforward enough; there was only a single permanent set and certainly it could not be subjected to the quick changes that are familiar to us in modern theatre. Obviously, it would have been impossible to suggest changes of locale by lighting changes as we can do today. In Greek and Latin drama, the stage represented a single place throughout the action, the plot narrated the events of a single day and there was very little irrelevant story as the action developed. Moreover, the unities of time and place were necessary in the ancient drama because of the chorus (Raysor 1927). They sung more than five times. The chorus made continuous representation an essential characteristic of Greek drama and thus made necessary the unities of time and place (Raysor 1927).

It is probable for me to use Jean Mairet's sense of the unities of time and place, that is, "time that does not exceed twenty-four hours, but may include a night and parts of two days; space that is restricted, but may include various localities in a city, forest, island or place of similar extent..." (Lancaster 1929:211) as well as Corneille's viewpoint on the unity of place, "what happens in a single city conforms to unity of place" (Dukore 236). To discuss the unities of time and place, I chose Shakespeare's play, *Julius Caesar*, one of the timeless creations of Shakespeare, the great master of known artists (Verity 1959).

Many condemned Shakespeare for violating the unities. Whether Shakespeare knew the unities and rejected them by design or diverged from them by happy ignorance, it is, I think impossible to decide. As I have mentioned previously, the unity of action and the unities of time and place arise apparently from false assumptions and by restricting the extent of the drama lessen its variety, I cannot think that they were not known by him or not observed. Shakespeare too had to work with a fixed architectural background, a limitation that did not prevent him from changing location from scene to scene. Clearly, a permanent set is by no means as

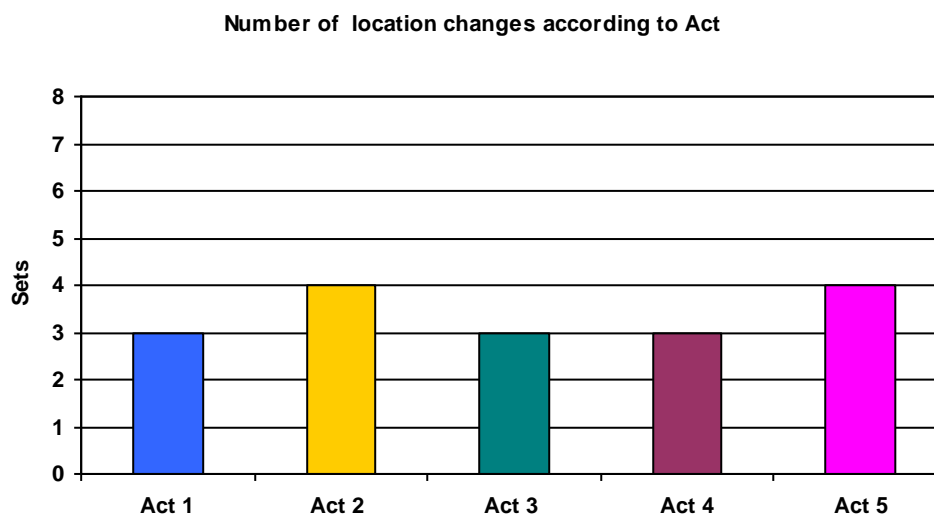
flexible as I seem to imply. The greater simplicity of location made it easier for the audience to understand the scenery. When the space represented might include localities in the whole of a town or island. I would see whether if these unities of time and place exist in *Julius Caesar* play.

The action of the play should represent the passage of no more than one day which we called “one revolution of the sun,” which we took to mean twelve hours; some would allow the play twenty-four hours of represented time. As stated by Lodovico Castelvetro, the action should not take longer than the actual time used by the players on the stage (Urban 1966) and for him, it was difficult to believe that an audience could conceive that more time had elapsed than they had themselves noticed pass in watching the play (Urban 1966). When I look at *Julius Caesar*, the unity of time was not observed by Shakespeare. It is his general practice to modify, compress or expand, time as need be (Musgrove 1941). The calculation of time of the play represented is approximately only. The length of time of the action represented exceeded twelve hours. In several points Shakespeare has squeezed the action, combining events into one scene. He has compressed the battle scenes in Act 5 into one night or day, which in actual time life would take longer than the time given on the stage.

Disputes arose over such problems as whether a single place meant one room or one city. If it is to say that unity of place must represent one single place or one city as Mairer's and Corneille's have define it, it “may include *various localities* in a city, forest, island or place of similar extent”. Corneille indicates that the stage would not show the entire city but “only two or three special places included within the enclosure of its walls” (236). This feature can be seen in *Julius Caesar*. The dominant characters in the play do not leave Rome but we can only find this in Act 1 until Act 3, somehow in Act 4 and 5, Shakespeare changed the location outside Rome, Philippi. The first act shows the city of Rome and the public square. The second act occurs in Brutus's orchard, then Caesar' house, a street and another part of street which still remains in Rome, in one city in various locations. This play happens in two places. Shakespeare did not make many changes on the place in each and every act (except Act 4 and 5) without leaving Rome. In other words between one particular scene and

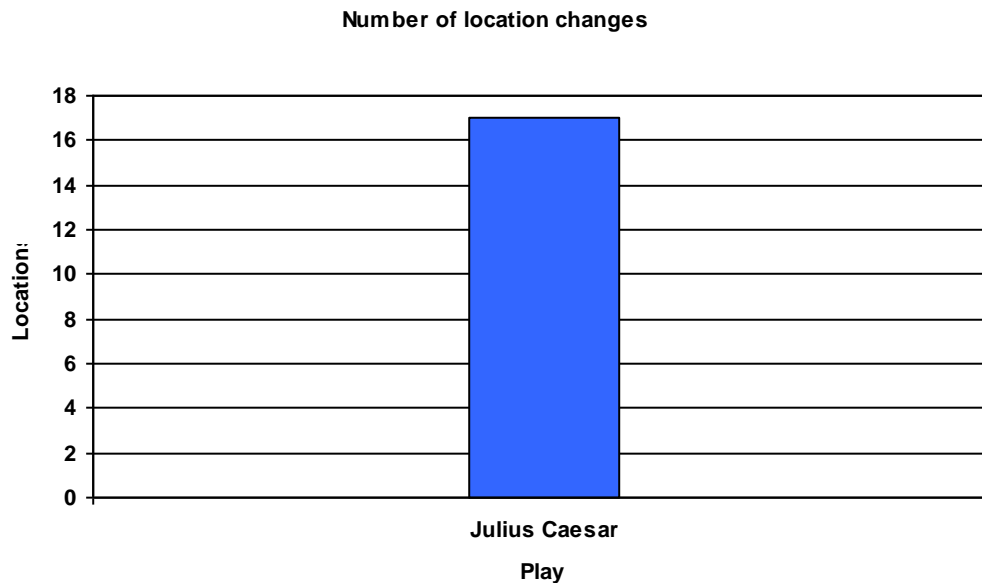
another, the places deliberately indicate one location. The scene takes place in several places with some appearance of probability: those places are so near each other as in the same town or city which may all be comprehended under the larger denomination of one place. Therefore, I would say that Shakespeare only used two locations or places in his play *Julius Caesar*, and he did not comply with the unity of place.

On the other hand, if the unity of place meant with unchanged set, that is “the set should never be changed in the same act, but only between one act and another” (236) or, that we never see in any of the play a scene changed in the Act, for instance, if the Act begins in a Garden, a Street or Chamber, this ended in the same place as Hedelin has states, “the place where the first actor, who opens the play, is supposed to be ought to be the same place to the end of the play, and that, it not being in the ordinary course of nature that the place can receive any change, there can be none likewise in the representation, and by consequence, that all your other actors cannot rationally appear in any other place” (Dukore 1974:244) as in permanent set, then the unity of place is not observed in *Julius Caesar* play. Shakespeare made many changes to the set and location in each scene. Perhaps it would be clearer if this can be shown in the diagram below.



The diagram above refers only to a unity of place with unchanged set and where action happens in one and the same location (for instance the hall of the same palace) as in the Ancient Greek, restricted to one location and place, and all the events

happen not in one single city, in other words, location changes in each scene in the play. The next diagram shows the overall number of location changes in *Julius Caesar*.



As I previously mentioned, I only respond fully to Jean Mairet's and Corneille's sense of the unity of place, that is, “space that is restricted [occurs in one single city, Rome], but may include various localities in a city [a street, Brutus's orchard, Caesar's house, the Senate, etc]...” (Lancaster 1929:211) and “what happens in a single city conforms to unity of place” (Dukore 236). Therefore, *Julius Caesar* shows that Shakespeare does not comply with the unities of time and place in the play, but *Julius Caesar* is a very popular and successful play. This suggests that failure to comply with the unities of time and place does not diminish a beautiful work of dramatic art.

### **PART B – A Qualitative Method (A basic interpretive approach)**

The unity that has any fundamental reason in it and that really is observed at all in dramatic works is the unity of action. Unity of action is bound up with all drama in which there must have a beginning, middle and an end. Aristotle never mentions place as a dramatic principle. For Aristotle, action basically means action from which no part can be taken without interrupting the overall causal and explanatory pattern (Urban 1966). Aristotle dealt with the unity of action in some detail under the general

subject of definition of tragedy. The unity of action is limited to a single set of incidents which are related as cause and effect, “having a beginning, a middle and an end.” I will only respond to stories (plays) with a beginning, middle and an ending, a sequence I experience as a unity of action. As Corneille has stated “what the poet chooses for his subject must have a beginning, a middle, and an end” (Dukore 1974:235) and “there must be only one complete action....but it can evolve only through several other incomplete actions, which serve as progressions and keep the spectator in a pleasant state of suspense” (235). He in addition suggests that “in tragedy, it consists of a unity of danger, whether the hero perishes in it or escapes from it” (235).

A play in which must have a beginning, middle and an end can be shown in Figure 1a (I have structured the plot of *Julius Caesar* to see the aspect of the unity of action in the play). First, a play should give light only to the characters of the persons and proceeds very little into any part of the action. Then working up of the plot where the play grows warmer, the design or action it is drawing on and audience sees something promising that will come to succeed. Thirdly, which destroys that expectation, ultimately involve the action in new difficulties and leaves us (as an audience) distant from that hope in which it first found us. Lastly, the discovery or unraveling of the plot, there, we see all things settling again upon their first foundations and the obstacles which hindered the design or action of the play once removed, it ends with that resemblance of truth and nature that the audience are satisfied with the conduct of it. This is how Aristotle divides the integral parts of a play and can be seen from the diagram below.

The structure or action of *Julius Caesar* is chronological, regular and even, and matches with the structure above. *Julius Caesar* is structured with a beginning, middle and an end. The first Act portrays a steadily increasing tension beginning with the quarrel between the tribunes and the plebeians. We see the hostility to Caesar, its cause and result, the conspiracy against him. The opening scene illustrates Caesar's popularity with the masses. Two tribunes scold the people for taking a holiday in the honor of Caesar and pull down the wreath of statues made of Caesar. From this, it is clear that Caesar was very popular among the commoners, and the conspirators were

not happy about this. All of the people loved Caesar for treating them well and having respect and he was very popular amongst his town folk. This scene gives light to the character of the person that is Caesar as the introduction to the audience.

The second act is devoted to the development of the conspiracy and brings us to the border of the crisis where the play grows warmer and “keep the spectator in a pleasant state of suspense” (Dukore 235). Cassius's words to Brutus in Act 1 have proved powerful in turning him against Caesar, while alone in his garden, Brutus has come to the conclusion that Caesar must be killed. Then Calpurnia had dreamt three times about Caesar's murder and urges that Caesar not leave the house after so many bad signs but because of his stubbornness, he leaves the house with the conspirators. This scene convinces the audience that the motive is strong enough.

The third act, this is where the major climax is, the greater excitement of the murder scene, and Armemidorus scene arouse our hope by showing that Caesar still has chance if he will only take the letter. Early in the third act the crisis is obtained in the achievement of the conspiracy. Then its outcome, the imprisonment destined to fall upon the leaders of the traitors, is foreshadowed and we are made to deeply sense that Caesar spirit ranging for revenge will verify even mightier than Caesar himself. By the close of the third act the first steps towards this revenge has been accomplished through the expulsion of the traitors from Rome. Brutus quickly convinces the people that Caesar had to die because he would have become a tyrant and brought suffering to them all. But Antony lights the fire of the people's fury with his presentation of Caesar's will.

The fourth act deals with the events that take place in the vacuum of power left by Caesar's death. Brutus and Cassius insult each other. Their argument seems to arise partially from a misunderstanding but also partially from stubbornness. Later the two men embrace and forgive each other. Caesar returns as a ghost to warn Brutus of his death. His ghost plays an important role in what happens to the rest of the conspirators. In the fifth act, the tragic circumstances of Cassius's death due to misinformation causes he to commit suicide. At the end, Brutus, like Cassius, addresses Caesar in an acknowledgement that Caesar has been avenged. The dead Brutus is almost immediately celebrated by his enemy as the noblest of Romans.

Brutus dies at the end of the play of his own will. We are left with the impression that happiness and satisfaction simply arise from an assessment of the victor or hero who is doing the speaking. In this scene the hero dies. It ends with that resemblance of truth and nature that the crowds are satisfied and the hindrances which obstructed the action are removed.

I have roughly outlined the plot or action of *Julius Caesar* to observe this admirable plot or action of the play, the conflict of it rises and decreases in every act (see Figure 1b). The second is greater than the first, the third than the second and so forward to the fifth. They are too until the very last scene, new difficulties arise to obstruct the action of the play and when the audience is brought into despair that the conflict can be accomplished, then and not before, the discovery is made. We could see the conflict or event arises in every act. Every element of the action jumps from and is subordinated to the central personality of the Dictator (Verity 1959). This verifies that Shakespeare gains rather than loses by violating the unity of action, and what is more important for Shakespeare is the beauty of the language. The structure of beginning, middle and end and the unity of danger are observed by Shakespeare in his tragedy, *Julius Caesar*; thus this play is successful.

### **PART C - A pertinent personal narrative**

‘The Unities’ enters the field of criticism. There is a little need today to say of ‘The Unities’ which once was the magnificent war of drama critics. It is said that all dramatic plays should adapt to the rule of the unities for fear of violating the rules. Whether one agrees or disagree with the rules, it did immensely refine and contribute to the work of art in the dramatic works. Debates and critiques on ‘The Unities’ have positively offer a various presumption and theory amongst the dramatists and critics, which afford an opportunity to them to widen and dramatically increase their knowledge in the dramatic art. Due to that ‘The Unities’ would not exist as a dramatic theory.

Knowing these three unities helps impressively to provide me with new knowledge and experience in dramatic theory/art specifically in understanding



English drama. I never had the opportunity to explore and analyse English plays before and reading many books and reliable sources on 'The Unities' provides me with an unexpected opportunity to continuously widen my knowledge on these three unities. I was amazed to know these rules, and it makes me think that it is unnecessary (or should I say we do no longer need the rules of 'The Unities' nowadays). Even if it is possible to avidly develop these rules, one might find it complicated to properly implement them. Somehow it is not worthless to reasonably hold to these rules. It is how we or society is willing to accept these rules in our modern or contemporary theatre. Perhaps, in my point of view, unities of place and action might be acceptable in nowadays theatre, but as for unity of time, we should be well aware whether to apply this unity of time in our modern theatre or not.

From the start, I am interested to discuss the unity of time, it somehow attracts me to give my opinion on this unity. Maybe I find the unity of time is impossible to implement in our contemporary theatre. The Aristotelian unity of time, as it today is known as 'speeded up' time, day, weeks, even years are organized as short scenes compressed into five or ten minutes of actual time. Time as an element in the performance, however, does matter a great deal. A play too long could destroy the pattern of the play and the audience might get bored and tired, thus the element of aesthetic beauty would be lost.

I would like to share my personal opinion on 'The Unities' when comparing with performances in Brunei that I have seen. They are much far different from what I have learned here. I tried to look into 'The Unities' in our dramatic plays and make a broader comparison between them. I noticed that they do merely exist within our plays. I could say it does resemble only two unities in particular ways. How had I never noticed this before? I have seen and even been involved in many theatre performances, and how frequently they (the two unities) appeared in our plays. The most common are the unity of place and unity of action where almost the performance calls for one unchanged scene and location throughout the play, focusing on a single action or plot. The set is never changed in any act since it focuses on one single place. This is popular amongst our playwrights and theatre practitioners. Audience is not aware of the location being changed because their attention is centered on the characters, besides it is obvious to identify the place the actors are in. The stage is free

from bulky scenery and this allows more space for the actor to move freely. Personally, knowing these unities did effectively provide me with new knowledge as I compared and looked into our plays. I was amazed to know it does exist in our plays.

When referring on the unity of time, most performances in our plays last not more than two hours. This is due to the circumstance that the actions are tighten up into shortest duration of time in order the performance to look more perfect. I have once tried to squeeze a two-hour performance into thirty minutes by taking out unnecessary scenes due to the condition applied without collapse the whole play. Audiences genuinely enjoyed the play very much and we won the competition. But as a person who aware hardly any rules in theatre, the element of aesthetic beauty in the play has lost. It made me think, whether the play runs in a short or long period of time, importantly, it counts on how the play successfully entertain the audience and audience get pleasure from the play.

To conclude my personal view, the question that we actually need to answer is, do 'The Unities' still relevant in our modern theatre? Nobody will know. But whether 'The Unities' are relevant or not, it is a beautiful work of dramatic art. Literature as its very best, something that will never be forgotten.

#### **PART D – Approaching theory as a theatre professional**

What is the significance of understanding the unities for a modern theatre professional? I will look upon these 'Unities' as a professional drama teacher. Watching plays must be considered a part of education. As far as I am concerned, the practice of these rules is no longer followed nowadays or maybe there is. These unities were esteemed in theory but ignored in practice. English drama has never been tightly bound by the 'Unities', I think. 'The Unities' were intended as a device to immensely refine dramatic art. Critics claimed that a play performed of necessity in one place over a few hours could not seem realistic of its action occurred in a number of settings and over long periods of time. It is, undoubtedly, still possible to write plays that adhere to Aristotle's or the French rules. The question is who eventually wants a well constructed 'Aristotelian' play when you can have an original?

One purpose of drama work is to adequately guide audience to an understanding of what is happening at a particular moment in time. Once a group enters the imaginary world of drama, the normal rules of time become suspended (Neelands 1984). Times become flexible and passages of time can be organized in a variety of ways to suit the group's purposes. We obviously discover many theories in drama but whether to accept it or throw them entirely, we should understand the rationale for doing so. For me, what is more important in a performance is to be part of the audience and share our intellectual thoughts with them through the play. Drama is seen as fine vehicle to communicate with the audience. A playwright or dramatist should know how to handle in a proper way to effectively obtain the interest of the audience; in return audience acknowledges and enjoys the play. As Neelands writes;

“It’s important to realize that theatre (as an art-form) does not work exclusively through actors and text; it employs a wider system of meaning-making in order to *evoke* and communicate with an audience. This wider system includes *signs* given by register, spatial relationships, costumes, properties, pace, tension, non-verbal signal etc. Together, these different forms of sign combine to create composite *images* that hold and resonate the meanings of the play. The image then becomes a focus for the audience’s thinking and responding.” (Neelands 1984:65)

Theatre is the best court society has. Plays tend to produce meaning rather than convey meaning. Personally, if by practicing the ‘Unities’ could help us to successfully achieve this purpose, and then I think it is not impossible to follow these rules in conducting into our play. It is how we think rationally to accept these rules or not. No matter what theory we use or apply, the important is, those theories show our readiness in experimenting and renewing a play making nowadays.

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