

# The Marvelous and the Supernatural on the Theater Stage (Fifteenth-Sixteenth Century)

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## ABSTRACT

How to reveal the divine, personify evil, show the invisible, make the supernatural believable, and represent the marvelous? What machines, special effects, and technical secrets are needed? At a time when biblical stories and Christian mysteries, ancient myths and elven legends, were performed on the theater stage, Leonardo da Vinci was not the only inventor of a technical arsenal for a theater of the marvelous. All of the resources of magic, alchemy, techniques, engineering, and pyrotechnics were deployed in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European theaters for the Italian angels, French dragons and devils, Dutch *sinnekens*, elves, fairies, goblins, magicians, witches, and Elizabethan ghosts and specters that filled the stage.



Sandro Botticelli, *Mystical Nativity* (1500-1501), National Gallery, London.

Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The golden stars and the dark night  
Ask questions in the dark  
About these splendid performers.

Victor Hugo, *The Contemplations*, "The Magi."

The upper section of the *Mystical Nativity*, painted by Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510) around 1500, shows a round dance of angels turning in a heavenly sky, above three archangels blessing the Virgin and Child. Botticelli drew inspiration from the stage machinery used during celebrations of the Annunciation at San Felice in Piazza church in 1471, thanks to the ingenuity of Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446), the architect of the Duomo in Florence. The ring of cherubs hanging from a metal circle was a traditional piece of theater machinery in Renaissance Italy. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) was also acquainted very early on with these performances that used machines, during his training at the Florentine workshop of Verrochio; he went on to make numerous drawings of stage devices, as did Francesco d'Angelo (1446-1488), known as Il Coccia, who according to Vasari invented automated cherubs that emerged from artificial clouds to adore the image of Christ. The theatrical performance *Danaë*, which was organized by Leonardo in 1496 and held in the palace of the count of Caiazzo, brother of Galeazzo Sanseverino, was full of ghosts, which were produced—if we are to believe the drawings from the *Codex Atlanticus*, one of his sketchbooks—with the help of flamboyant and illuminated mandorla lowered from the ceiling using a system of counterweights and gears. Mercury descends from Olympus, hangs in the air, and delivers a message to Danaë from the enamored Jupiter. A golden shower pours over Danaë, who turns into a star and rise up to the sky, accompanied by divine sounds.

How to reveal the divine, show the invisible, make the supernatural believable, and represent the marvelous? What machines, special effects, and technical secrets are needed? These were most likely the questions asked by directors in France, at a time when biblical stories and Christian mysteries appeared on the stage. Fifteenth and sixteenth-century sources generally refer to the sets and specialized machinery used for mystery plays as *feintes* (secrets). This included the entire stage arsenal that made visible the mysteries of the faith, or the passion of Christ and the saints: trap doors for appearances and disappearances, machines, flying devices, masks, fire and water, various natural and supernatural animals animated on the stage, idols (dummies that replaced actors' bodies during torture and decapitations), lighting effects (brightness of Paradise), sound effects (thunder of Hell), and even scents and olfactory effects. A manuscript from Bourges used by the painter-decorator of the *Mystery Play of the Acts of the Apostles*, which was commissioned by King René of Anjou from Simon Gréban during the 1470s, and performed in the amphitheater of Bourges in 1536 and at l'hôtel de Flandres in Paris in 1541, lists all of the *feintes* and *secrets* that had to be produced for the stage, delighting us with angels, devils, divinity personified ghosts, monsters, fantastic apparitions and marvelous animals:

- *The enchanters Zazoès and Arphasac set out to meet two magical dragons that spew fire from their eyes, nose, mouth, and ears; Saint Matthew approaches them until he is standing near a trapdoor, with the dragons at his feet.*
- *Another dragon comes out of this trapdoor, the most horrible of all, and lies down at Saint Matthew's feet when he speaks.*
- *The duke's second knight offers a cow made of myrrh and aloe as a present to the gods.*
- *Saint Paul is decapitated; his head bounces three times, each bounce releasing a jet of milk, blood, and water.*
- *Jesus descends from Heaven in a blaze of light.*

- *Seven devils in the form of dogs appear from under-stage in seven different locations.*

The actors who played devils—prized roles for their gestural virtuosity and scandalous charm—were well aware of the dangerous nature of their role-playing. For instance, an actor appearing in the *Mystery Play of Saint Barbara*, performed in Avignon in 1470, had to certify via a notary that he was playing the role of Lucifer by mouth and not by heart, and that the devil could not have designs on his soul after the performance. In addition to posing risks for an actor's soul, roles as devils also endangered their bodies, as many accidents resulting from special effects gone awry were related in chronicles and accounts of performances. A *master of secrets*, who possessed the know-how as well as the alchemical and engineering formulas, was necessary for the most spectacular shows. A fragment from a fifteenth-century Rouergat manuscript, most likely a technical notebook belonging to one of these masters of secrets, points out in the section entitled "Secret for making a devil covered in fire," that the devil's entire body should be coated with turpentine. Cotton soaked in aguardiente was then added to the turpentine to set it on fire, and the doses of powder to his feet and hands were adjusted. A cavity in the mask covering the artist's face is kept humid, so that pieces of coal can be inserted without burning him. All that remained was for another actor to set his partner on fire, using a goose feather system containing a mix of inflammable liquid and sulfur, and hell personified danced before the very eyes of the stunned spectators. While dancing, shouting, and fire-breathing devils filled the scaffolds of French mystery plays, Dutch morality plays were full of small characters acting as allegories of the vices, as in the *rederijker* of Jan Smeeken, a playwright at a Brussels chamber of rhetoric and city poet circa 1485.

Italian angels, French dragons and devils, Dutch *sinnekens*, elves, fairies, goblins, magicians, witches, and Elizabethan ghosts and specters. All of Shakespeare's (1564-1616) oeuvre is shrouded in mystery, the supernatural, and the marvelous, for which seasoned technicians were also needed. On late sixteenth-century stages in London, the fairy king Oberon and his small jester Puck, charming fantastical creatures from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, rub shoulders with the ghostly figures from *Hamlet*. Shades and phantoms pervaded both Renaissance and ancient theater, such as the shade of Tantalus in the prologue to Seneca's *Thyestes*, or the shade of Thyestes in *Agamemnon*. French and Italian tragedians directly drew inspiration from them, for instance Giraldi Cinzio's *Orbecche*, which was performed in 1541, Garnier's *Hippolyte* (1573), Baroncini's *Tragedia* (1547), Bozza's *Fedra* (1577), and Trapolini's *Thesida* (1576).

All of the resources of magic, alchemy, techniques, engineering, and pyrotechnics were used to produce the theater of the marvelous that appeared on the European stage during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

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