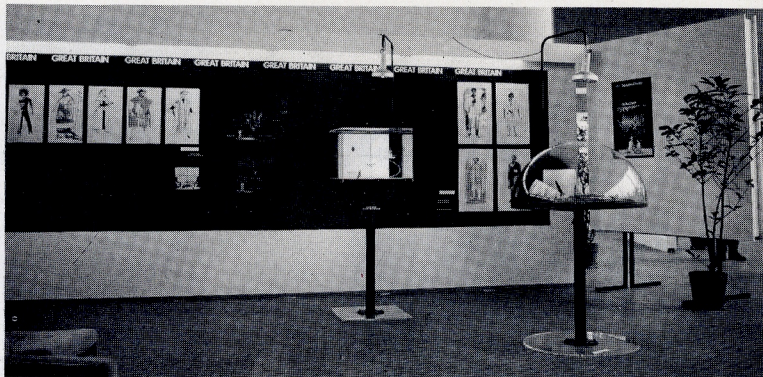


# Q Prague quadrennial '75

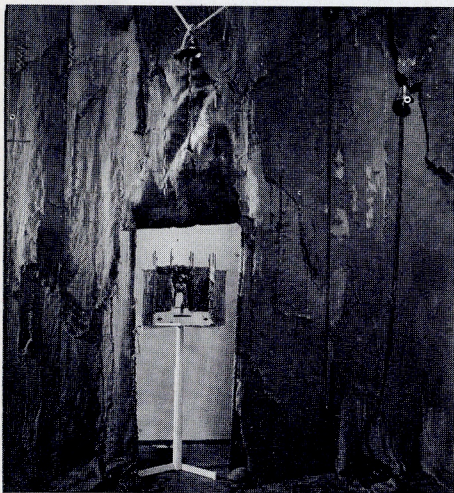
## IN PRAGUE



Great Britain

How is it possible to begin to write about the *Prague Quadrennial Exhibition of Theatre Design and Architecture*?\* In three separate visits of three hours each, I could only begin to absorb a fraction of the designs, models, photographs, etc., from such a large cross-section of the world's theatrical productions (musical, verbal, and physical) in every organisational format from National Monument through to extemporised happening.

For what do these pre-production models or post-production photographs tell us about the reality of a performance? In my own experience, not a lot. In many cases the



USSR

model is more exciting than what actually happens on stage; and, conversely, in many cases the model is but a pale shadow of the visual excitement of the stage experience. And here I think is the crunch, the problem of mounting a design exhibition: designs and models become works of art in their own right. Indeed PQ 75 was full of examples of pictorial and plastic art of the highest order.

But a stage design, be it a two-dimensional pictorial or a three-dimensional model, is but an *instruction* and an *indication*. An instruction to the technician of what he must construct and an indication to the actor of the physical geography of the performance space. And the model alone cannot convey the designer's intention; there has to be an accompanying series of sketches to indicate how the designer imagines it will look under light.

\* For archivists, we should perhaps record that although called PQ 75, the event in fact took place in January 1976.

That was PQ 75. A wealth of international pictorial and plastic art, and a demonstration of communication within a production team. But no exhibition can indicate how the design finally lived as an actor's performance environment in the fourth theatrical dimension of fluid light.

More plans and sections would have been interesting and lighting design documentation was totally ignored. It is from such information, peripheral to the model, that we can begin to build up a total picture.

The official jury reached a conclusion which appeared to be in agreement with the general consensus of opinion, and major awards were made to the USSR for their total contribution and to four UK designers: John Bury, Ralph Koltai, Timothy O'Brien and Tazeena Firth who shared the gold medal for individual designers.

Of designers unknown to me, I was particularly attracted by three names whose work excited me to the point of wanting to rush off there and then to see a performance realisation. Valerij Leventhal (a Moscow *Cherry Orchard* and Gogol's *The Marriage*). Marian Kotodsiej (Poland—super ideas, but I am curious as to how they actually work within stage conventions). Manfred Hürig (an *Acis and Galathea* in Brussels). And the French and Finnish scenes were generally attractive.

The architectural section of the exhibition was on a smaller scale and if it did not exactly depress, it certainly did little to stimulate. Most of the stages seemed practical enough in technical working terms: but all those wide, wide, and getting wider frontages (framed or open)! We are theorising ourselves into a right old international mess when it comes to building theatres. Should we not perhaps be looking more to the 18th and 19th centuries for inspiration? Inverness has. I believe that we all shall have to study Inverness pretty closely.

With training as the colloquium theme at the concurrent OISTT Congress, it was right and proper that design students should be invited to Prague to stage their own exhibition. There were exciting ideas in handling form and texture, but not a lot of evidence of expertise in marshalling these ideas within the discipline of an actual stage. This is inevitable since the main problem, indeed frustration, of students is that most projects cannot be developed beyond the model.

The UK students tried to introduce an

extra dimension into exhibited design by personally manipulating objects in time as well as space. Apart from a lack of pace variation due to their efforts to avoid the impression of giving a conventional acting performance, I think it worked. It certainly avoided the obvious trap of pretension; and any experiment in exhibition format is worth pursuing.

But if all we saw in these design exhibitions was an indication of where theatre is going, I am not filled with joy. Certainly at a mundane level, for those of us who have to pay for scenery or heave it about, the news is not good. A visually over-elaborate theatre does not serve the actor, and the actor cannot in turn serve the author. And what is theatre but the communication of author with audience? So it was right that we should all meet in Prague. The city where the designers know how to create so much from so little. By identifying the essential elements. By simplifying rather than elaborating. By removing rather than adding. The theme in Prague was education: perhaps tomorrow's designers should be encouraged to seek *style through economy*.

## OISTT

I cannot report the details of the Fourth OISTT Congress for, although I was in Prague, I was much too involved in seeing exhibitions, performances, and indeed Prague itself, to be able to give my full attention and attendance to the formal proceedings. Let me just say that OISTT has now firmly established itself as *the* international communicating body for the world's scenographers, designers, technologists, technicians—indeed the parent organisation for everyone who designs the visual aspect of a production or helps to realise that design. The member countries appear to comprise large chunks of the world; perhaps by next Congress, every single nation will be involved. It is indeed stimulating to think that scenography and theatre technology are becoming such a medium for international understanding.