

THE POLITICS OF DESIGN

World changes are reflected at Prague Quadrennial.

By Arnold Aronson

Every four years since 1967, the world's theatre designers have come to Prague. Nowhere else and at no other time is so much scenic design, costume design and theatre architecture brought together: 36 nations participated this year, making this seventh edition of the Prague Quadrennial of Stage Design (or the PQ, as it has come to be known) a unique microcosm of developments not only in design but in theatre in general. The gathering, held June 10-30, also revealed a world in economic and political turmoil looking for new ways to express itself.

Politics was implicit in the very list of participants. Cuba, Vietnam and Cambodia were not present. Israel and South Korea were represented for the first time. Neither of these latter two countries had been recognized by Czechoslovakia's former Communist regime, but now they were welcomed, and designer Jaroslav Malina, commissioner general of the PQ, proudly cited their presence as proof of the changes in both his government and the PQ itself. Even Syria made its first visit to the PQ—with, of all things, a small Mozart exhibit.

An international jury bestows awards in the areas of architecture, scenography, costume design, thematic exhibits (this year the theme was design for Mozart) and the Golden Trigue to the best overall exhibit. The United States won the Trigue in 1987; this time it received a gold medal for "Mozart in America," an exhibit organized by Eric Fielding featuring designs by Adrienne Lobel and George Tsybin (for Peter Sellars's productions), John Conklin and Zack Brown. Great Britain won its second Golden Trigue with a startling display of scenic models, including ones by Joe Vanek (whose design for Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* will go on view on Broadway this month), and Richard Hudson received acclaim for his sets and costumes for last season's ill-fated Broadway production of *La Bête*.

A united Germany made its first PQ appearance, and the English-language insert to the German catalogue breathlessly marveled at the political changes since the last PQ. Images of walls and their destruction were everywhere in Germany's four-room environmental display, with

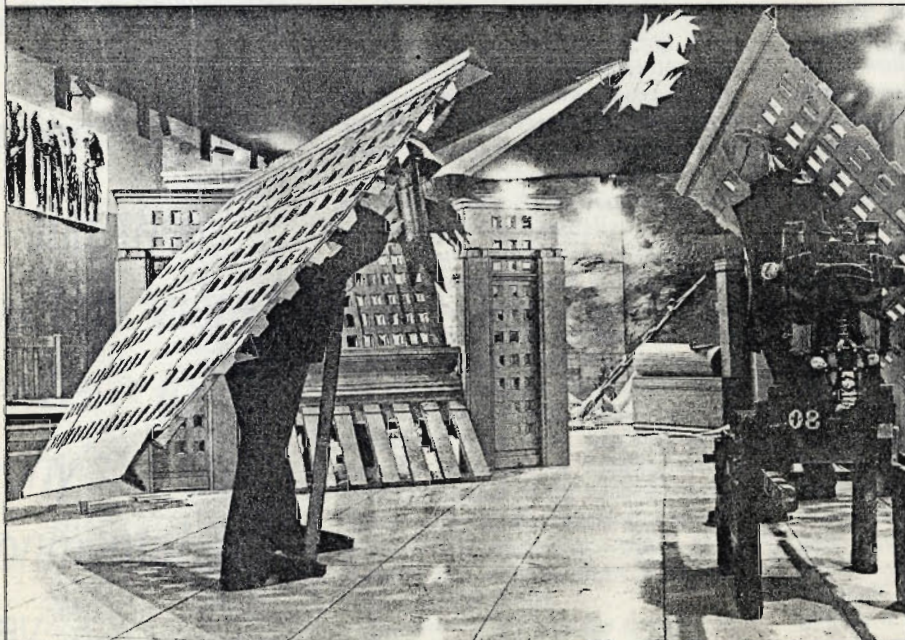
Heiner Müller's *Germania Death in Berlin* as a centerpiece. At the point where the four rooms met there was a steel-frame revolving door with the glass missing—you could treat it as a normal revolving door or walk right through as if it did not exist.

The Quadrennial also allowed countries to play out internal political struggles and divisions. The beautiful display of photographs from Spain was pointedly identified as "Spain-Catalonia"—these were theatres from Barcelona, not Madrid. Canada was represented primarily by its French-speaking contingent. Yugoslavia, which was on the verge of civil war as the Quadrennial opened, democratically and without comment displayed designs from virtually all its major cities.

The Soviet exhibit was the most fascinating, as much for what it was not as what it was. The U.S.S.R. team had always been a major force at the PQ, but this time it went home without a single prize. Its exhibit, designed by Irina Akimova and based on her designs for adaptations of Dostoyevsky works, was a low-ceilinged room complete with piano, toilet, chairs and tables all carved out of corrugated cardboard. While clever, the use of cardboard was clearly an economic measure—the exhibit could be discarded at the end. Furthermore, the Soviets could not afford even the simplest catalogue. The pavilion became an embodiment of the daily headlines about Soviet economic collapse.

Economics was certainly not a problem for the Japanese. Their two-story wooden-framed teahouse was packed with models, photos, costumes and renderings. It seemed to have been inspired by 1987's award-winning American exhibit, which consisted of a four-room design studio. But whereas the American pavilion had captured the spirit and energy of the design process, the Japanese referred to their exhibit as a "warehouse," and indeed it was a lifeless, almost random collection of uninspired objects that left most viewers disappointed.

The previous American exhibit, in fact, seemed to have influenced many of this year's entries. There were several "environments" looking more like our 1950s art installations or amusement park funhouses than theatrical displays. Poland, Finland, Denmark and Switzerland as well as Germany and the Soviet Union created en-



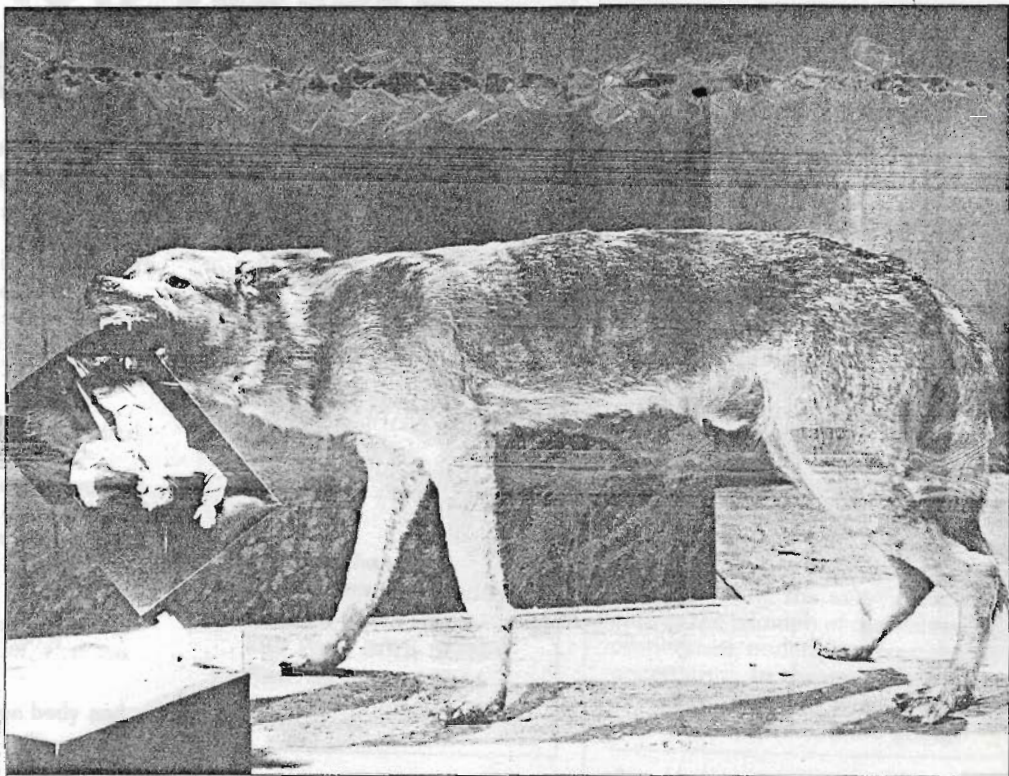
Institutional walls come tumbling down in the Soviet Union's all-cardboard display at the Quadrennial.

ERIC FIELDING

The New Actors

posed spaces where spectators could walk through a theatrical setting. The Finnish exhibit by Tiina Makkonen is a kind of decrepit house with fragments of scenery composing the furnishings of individual rooms or spaces—there was even a room with water coursing down a clear plastic wall. To exit the Polish exhibit one had to traverse a plexiglass floor above a grave containing figures similar to Stanislas Kantor's "emballages." The Swiss entry was not an exhibit at all but a piece of performance art by Marianne Mettler—participants were given personal tape players and listened, as they walked through a maze filled with abstract images, to a "dialogue" between writers Franz Kafka and Robert Walser set to music by Markus Eichenberger. Computer-coordinated lights guided spectators through the maze.

In many of these exhibits the artists were struggling with a fundamental problem: how to present artifacts of the theatrical process while still preserving the sense and experience of theatre. Any exhibition of design tends to reduce the stage to half-inch scale. The spectator must constantly peer through mini-prosceniums, bend over to view the stage at bellybutton height, try to translate the flat image of photographs (themselves often incomplete or imbued with their own aesthetics) into the three-dimensional and temporal experience of the stage. What's more, the art of the designer is divorced from the text, the conception of a director and, most



A ravenous stuffed wolf, part of an installation for *Oedipus Rex* designed by Nigel Lowery for the English National Opera, guards the entrance of the British exhibit at the Prague Quadrennial of Stage Design.

important, the life of the actors. Environmental exhibits at the PQ created a kind of substitute for the stage. In the humorous Hungarian exhibit, which consisted of a series of small plexiglass windows embedded in walls, spectators could push a button beneath each window that caused a tiny curtain to rise, revealing a set model or cluster of mannequins; beneath each window was saucer for donations. In the Australian and Polish displays, continuously changing lights transformed the models as you watched; in one Australian model the set changed mechanically.

But the inevitable happened: the more interesting and theatrical the display, the farther it grew from the actual productions represented. The most entertaining exhibits seemed to tell the least about the theatre from which it was derived. Most of the installations were dark, and one often had the sensation of walking into a forbidding cave. In the case of Poland, this was clearly an intentional artistic and political statement—much of its theatre has always been dark and shadowed by death.

But how to account for the gloominess elsewhere? Even the British ex-

hibit was mounted in a black void. Its unifying theme was the transience and disposability of the tools and products of the design process. Models were displayed in trash cans, mounted atop old tires, created out of automotive junk metal or encased in black plastic tarps; the entrance was guarded by a stuffed dog that resembled a wolf. But the intention was not obvious to everyone. In the context of the shattered glass and barbed wire of Germany, the forbidding gloom and darkness of Poland, and the mouldering world of Finland, this seemed like just one more statement of a decaying world dominated by detritus—a society gone mad.

There were two optimistic pavilions: the Czech and the American. The latter was a bright and open display of the variety of Mozart productions in the United States, with some 30 set and costume designers represented. At the back of the pavilion were three TV monitors and about a dozen chairs where people could sit and watch director Peter Sellars explain Mozart. If the exhibit was more a museum than a piece of theatre, it offered a welcome respite for spectators weary of forced participation.

"IMAGES OF walls and their destruction were everywhere in Germany's environmental display."

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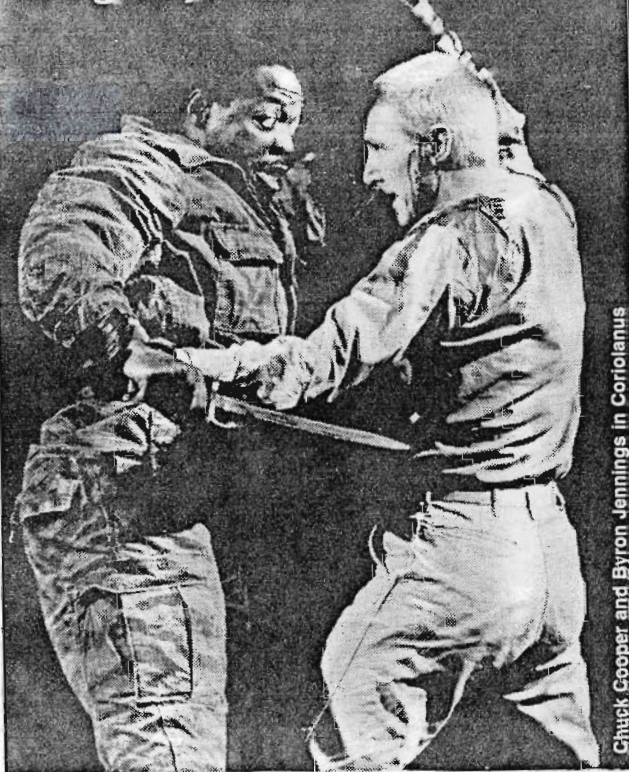
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EVENTS

Czechoslovakia, as host, chose a prime location for its pavilion: against a five-story wall of windows overlooking the unparalleled beauty of Prague. Approaching the exhibit one saw gray monolithic walls rising two stories high, with torn red banners dangling overhead and lying on the ground. Next to the entrance were the dates 1948-1990 and marks on the wall counting each year like the marks of a prisoner counting days. Entering the pavilion through two tall doors one was immediately struck with light and the open vista of Prague: the walls had been breached, the future was bright, and hope soared into the distance. But the display itself was mostly of the past, exhibiting many designs seen at previous PQs—a careful retelling of history. While the exhibit meant to convey the triumph of the Velvet Revolution, its underlying message was uncertainty. In theatre as in politics, it is easier to know where you came from than where you are going.

Arnold Aronson was president of the international jury of PQ '91.

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