

# PQ '91

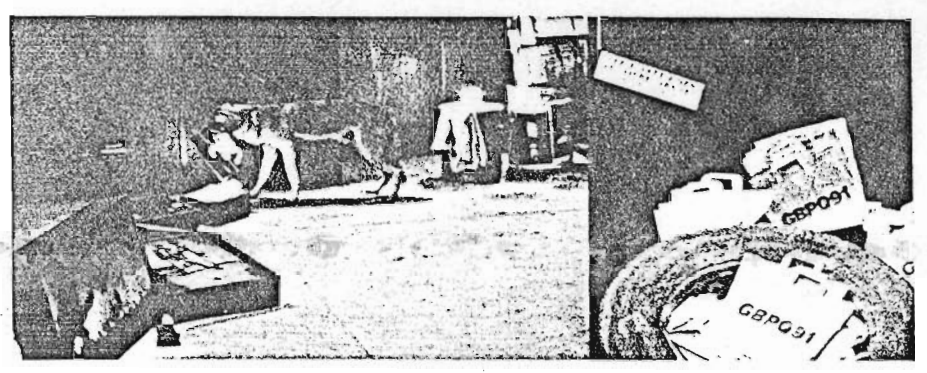
## The Magnificent Seven

British designers have been consistent Prague Quadriennale award-winners ever since they first participated, in 1975, and this year a team of seven continued their success, carrying off the premier award, the Golden Triga, for their collective national stand. *Sightline* asked each designer to give us their view both of the UK exhibit and of the rest of the show.

### PAMELA HOWARD

*Director of Studies at the Theatre Design Department of Central St Martins College of Art and Design, London. Exhibit: John Brown's Body, Glasgow 1990 (see Sightline 24/3).*

The G.B. exhibit displayed something of the diversity of approaches to design, and succeeded in bringing together a completely different group of artists into one unified display. Visitors to the exhibit were left to gather from the display what they could, and the comment that some explanation of the exhibits would have been helpful and informative, was, in my opinion justified. I felt that it was a pity that there was no indication of any costume work, apart from Antony McDonald's pyjama bottoms in a dustbin filled with water! Very enigmatic, but they didn't get the attention they deserved. Transformed into an art exhibit, the working model clearly gains in presentation. However, it also loses in terms of its primary purpose — to communicate to the audience. In this sense *Dancing at Lughnasa* seemed to



be able to fulfil both functions most successfully. The brown paper bags with our names on were a great idea, but a properly illustrated catalogue, with explanations about our work and accompanying illustrations of artwork not on display would be a very useful addition to the proposed London and Glasgow showings of the exhibit. The difficulty of conveying the real excitement and innovation in Theatre Design was evident in the Catalan photographic exhibit. On close examination it revealed an explosion of visual invention that was nowhere else to be seen.

The French exhibit, cool and understated, exemplified the term "scenography" by concentrating on the organisation of the stage space, and the creation rather than the decoration.

The Greek one-man show was outstanding, as were 3 young comparatively unknown Soviet designers who constructed their exhibit on site out of brown card boxes, including a grand piano, chairs and a toilet!

A number of scenographers were also teachers, and the student section was full of life and energy, with more drawing and artwork than in the main section. The Polish students, showing influences of Kantor, constructed a wonderful Al Capone car out of an old Skoda.

Too many exhibitors over-concentrated on the display at the expense of the scenographic work, but in this respect the British exhibit struck a happy medium.

### RICHARD HUDSON

*Olivier Award winner 1988 for his Old Vic season (see Sightline 23/1). Exhibit: Too Clever by Half, Old Vic 1988 and A Clockwork Orange, RSC 1990.*

The strength of the British exhibit was its variety. Seven very different designers presented examples of work in a quite witty and uncompromising way. In all, there were ten productions represented and the space was largely uncluttered by unnecessary information. I think it would have been more

striking as a whole if the idea of the ephemerality of our work had been more strictly adhered to, particularly as so many of the other national exhibits displayed isolated and meaningless costume drawings and rows of dull models in perspex boxes. The idea of presenting single images as if thrown into dustbins or wrapped in black garbage bags could have been more pointed, emphasising the fact that for all of us aesthetic preferences, stylistic devices and even fashion are constantly changing: when one production has opened, we're on to the next, without looking back.

With thirty-three countries participating it is easy to imagine their enormous variety, and diverse standards.

The Russian exhibit was the most original — a furnished room, with adjacent lavatory, peopled with figures bent almost double under the weight of monumental facades strapped to their backs — made entirely of cardboard.

The Germans, ex-East and West exhibiting together for the first time, were the most thought-provoking, with striking images presented in a flash and curiously expensive way.

I was disappointed by the Japanese. For a country so rich in excellent design in many fields, their exhibit seemed dull and unimaginative.

The French and Italians were represented by second-rate work which in no way indicated the wealth of talent available in both those countries.

The American exhibit, *Mozart in America*, like a dispiriting trade show stand, displayed masses of work and some appalling costumes. There was, however, a very interesting video on Peter Sellars and his Mozart/Da Ponte productions.

### RALPH KOLTAI CBE

*RSC Associate Artist. Olivier winner 1967, 1978, 1984. (See Sightline 18/1) Exhibit: Metropolis, London 1989.*

The grapevine has it that the jury were unanimous in their decision to award the Golden Triga to the British entry. Although our exhibit looked interesting,



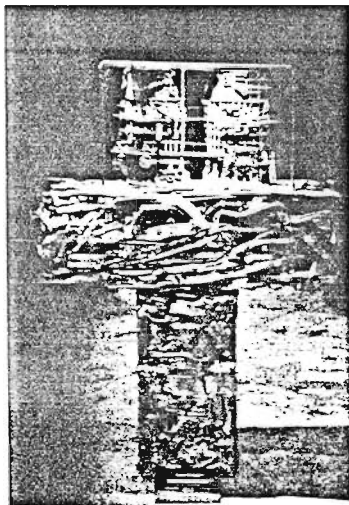
John Brown's Body

varied in content, professional in execution, to me this was certainly not a foregone conclusion. It is impossible to know what criteria a panel of judges may apply.

I believe we attained recognition through skilful manipulation having determined to depart from our previous award-winning formula of purist stylish presentation.

All the productions referred to had received great critical and public acclaim in performance and/or visual presentation, which our exhibits did not and could not hope to convey. However we may be pleased to assume that our concept of presentation based on the transitory nature and ultimate obsolescence of all our work found recognition in the eyes of the jury.

Due to problems political, financial and other, the venue for the 1991 PQ was less suitable, less grand than on previous occasions. The Palace of Culture is somewhat remote and the Exhibition within not easy to locate. It is hard to see how with additionally minimal promotion the exhibition will attract many visitors after the aficionados of the first few days.



Metropolis

The first impression was that of a generally higher and more stylish level of presentation than in the past. However, further and closer scrutiny in the course of our week, was to me one of diminishing returns. Indeed the presentation was superior, but not the work: a "tired" look, frequently "déjà vu", sometimes ambitious, expensive but confused. The Swiss never managed to get their light/sound linked computerised system to work; the Brazilians did not get their display finished on time and the German exhibit clearly suffered from the conflict of unification. There were exceptions. The Greek entry by one lone designer, Dionissis Fotopoulos, was distinctly superior in my view to all else. The

Soviet exhibit was inventive and distinctive. Perversely neither received any award.

Interestingly there was more adventurous work to be found in the students' exhibit in the basement car park — if you managed to find your way there!



#### NIGEL LOWERY

*Studied at the Central School of Art. A nominee for the Critics' Circle award, 1990, for The Illusion (Old Vic), he has designed largely for opera companies, including Opera North, Scottish Opera and English National Opera. Exhibit: Oedipus Rex, London, 1991.*

In terms of a theatrical space I thought we failed — somehow it couldn't amalgamate itself and the idea of rubbish, for me, slightly backfired in that it seemed to suggest that we had a bad opinion of our work. Richard Hudson quite rightly mentioned that we should all have used the same idea; instead we suffered from a rather bitty approach. The exhibit did, however, seem simple in terms of images, so that the spectator wasn't overwhelmed. Pamela's puppet and picture on the wall seemed out of place. Modelmaking stood out as a forte. It was good that the range of work was varied but that is perhaps another argument for being "cleaner".

The idea of the bags was excellent as a concept but seemed wrong in the way that it advertised. I thought also that in presenting ourselves we should have done better than producing a slip of biographies.

PQ as a whole I found disappointing and uninteresting. In fact I was surprised that people were taking so long to look around. A quick glance in most of the stands was enough for me to realise whether I liked the work or not — alas, many were too dull. Only a few stand out, primarily Germany, an

exhibit which not only seemed thoroughly and intelligently worked out but also contained what was in my opinion the best set design, Bert Neumann's *Die Rauber*. Other works I remember were the Spanish exhibit and the students downstairs. I admired a lot the theatrical spaces of Finland and Poland. I regret there was no work which fired my own imagination.

#### ANTONY McDONALD

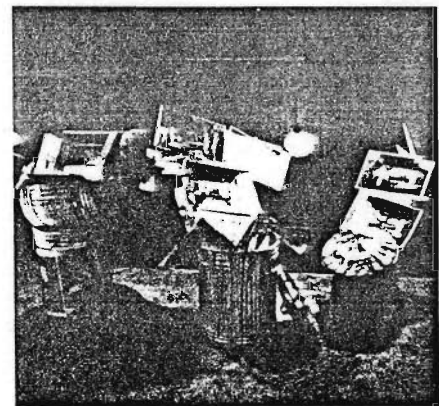
*Has designed for the Royal Court, RSC, Old Vic and National Theatre, for opera and for the dance theatre company Second Stride, of which he is an associate director. Exhibit: Hamlet, Stratford, 1989 and As You Like It, London, 1989.*

I think I am a little ashamed of our self-promoting carrier bags emblazoned with the names of the British team, because I feel this added to the supermarket quality of the exhibition as a whole and celebrated name and fame over work and worth.

I was pleased that we had escaped from the perspex box chicness of previous exhibitions but I feel we should have been more rigorous in our approach and I am not convinced that we got the balance of exhibits right.

However I think there was something valuable in the individuality of our display and its transient fragile quality.

I also feel our room had a little life in it, because all the designers involved had actually been in the room, so that it did not feel quite so packaged.



Hamlet and As You Like It

Due to the 1991 Jubilee Exhibition the Prague Quadriennale was not in its usual venue but spread over the foyers and part of the underground car park of the Palace of Culture.

To me this rather undermined the impact of the event — the exhibition layout had little sense of theatre or celebration. Personally I wished we had all shown in the sprawling car park, where the students' work had life and energy, compared to the overwhelming stuffiness and deadliness upstairs.

Nation upon nation revealed their theatrical priorities and begged the question, who chooses the work and why? Who decides how it will be shown?

America resembled a trade show promoting Mozart; Japan a theme park disguising glossy westernization.

There was soul, however, in the calm dignity of the Korean exhibit and the extraordinary cardboard apartment of Russia.

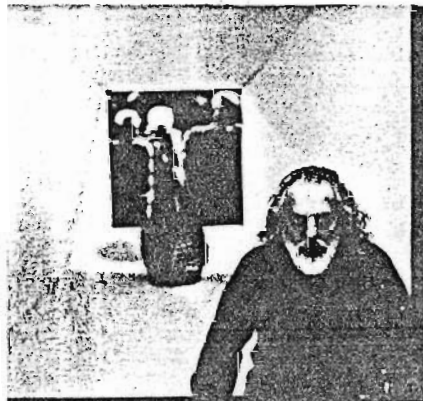
I felt, too, that the German room was sadly undervalued by the judges.

#### TIMOTHY O'BRIEN

*Chairman of the Society of British Theatre Designers. Has designed 30 productions for the RSC, and worked for opera companies including Covent Garden and the Coliseum. Former Head of Design for ABC TV. Exhibit: Love's Labour's Lost, Stratford, 1990 and Twelfth Night, London 1991.*

For the first time since 1975, all our exhibitors are in Prague together. I feel anxious about the others, knowing well

to a frustrating sense that there's something there which is hard to get. But there are pleasures: beyond the naive surface of *Mozart in America*, the video devoted to Peter Sellars reveals a vivid and valid language; in the Soviet exhibition, where the dilapidated burdens of Stalinist buildings artfully cut from corrugated cardboard are carried by bowed, dark sandwich men into an unguessable future, deep feeling is involved; and Dionyssis Fotopoulos is the individual star. His simple tunnel,



perhaps more as a state of mind than as State of the Art.



Foreground, John Brown's Body; right, Dancing at Lughnasa

Plaudits first: impressive work from Finland (a nightmarish Tarkovsky labyrinth) and, from Russia (a cardboard city within a cardboard city)