



PQ'91: AN OVERVIEW

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The various articles in this special issue of *TD&T* will attempt to record and report both a sense of the scope and the detail of the 1991 edition of the premiere international exhibition of theatre design—the Prague Quadrennial. Not an easy task under any circumstance. The reader will encounter personal reactions to individual works of design and to a variety of exhibition presentation styles. There will even be conflicting opinions and contrasting points of view on particular exhibits. This is not a complete report or even a balanced one. But it should give the reader at least some sense of the considerable scale of this important event.

Our authors volunteered from the ranks of the American delegation to Prague to write on an area or aspect of the PQ which caught their attention. This means that not all countries or areas of the exhibition received equal (or any) attention. Some who had initially expressed an interest in writing were ultimately unable to contribute which left additional holes in our coverage, the most obvious case being the architectural exhibitions.

In viewing PQ'91—which was open to the public 10-30 June 1991—it became immediately obvious that the current world-wide economic recession has had a very real impact on production in the theatre and on the individual nation's abilities to effectively exhibit the work of their respective theatre communities. The exhibitions at PQ'91 were considerably smaller in size and in scope than previous Quadrennials. The "smallness" of the various national exhibits was certainly due in large part to the

limitations of space inherent at the exhibition venue: the Palace of Culture. But although the cliché suggests that "good things come in small packages," that did not, for the most part, prove true for many of the international exhibitions at PQ'91.

Instead of being distilled and crystalized displays of a select few of the finest pieces of design from the previous five years, many of the national exhibits simply seemed to be attempts to do the best with a difficult situation—both physical and economic. The "smallness" manifest itself most frequently in the fact that there was considerably less "hard" artwork on display than usual. There were a lot more photographs and a lot fewer maquettes and mannequins. This lack of real art certainly diminished the depth and richness normally experienced at the previous six Quadrennials. Having had the rare privilege of viewing and documenting four of the seven PQs, it was disappointingly easy to conclude that, in spite of its many strengths, this was the "poorest" of the Prague Quadrennials.

Costume design seemed particularly under-represented within this year's Quadrennial. Not only were there considerably fewer costumed mannequins, there weren't a lot of renderings on the walls. Some exhibitions—including the Golden Trigue Award-winning British exhibit—didn't have any costumes at all. It was not surprising when the awards were announced that no Gold Medal was given for costume design at PQ'91.

Another thing which became immediately obvious was that the Golden Trigue Award-winning exhibition by the United States at

PQ'87—an environmental exhibition of four archetypal design studios filled with a rich mass of design work in process—had had a profound influence on many of the national exhibits mounted this year. It was certainly not the first environmental exhibition ever seen at PQ—the Golden Trigue was won by West Germany in 1983 for a beautiful exhibition of designs for the operas of Leos Janáček mounted within a reconstruction of a set for *Káta Kabanová*—but that so many of the 1991 exhibits were environmental in nature could not be seen as coincidental. Unfortunately, in some instances, the design work being exhibited was lost or overshadowed by the environmental exhibition space.

Documenting an event such as the Prague Quadrennial is a nearly impossible task. Dealing with reflections, photographing photographs and working under poor lighting conditions made it a particular challenge. The new venue at the Palace of Culture made it worse than usual. The exhibitions were spread over four floors of lobby (and parking garage) space. The extremely low fluorescent-lit ceilings made it impossible to get overview photos. And where that wasn't a problem, you were shooting into huge glass windows, which provided a spectacular panorama of Prague, but certainly not ideal conditions to view or photograph artwork.

But in spite of its weaknesses this time, the Prague Quadrennial has once again provided a unique opportunity to catch a glimpse of what is happening in theatres all over the world, just as it has at each of its seven mountings over the past 24 years.

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