



THE 1991 PRAGUE QUADRENNIAL

OF GARBAGE & GOLD: GREAT BRITAIN AT PQ'91

BY LINDA SARVER

Awolf with his ears flattened to his head and a ripped photograph in his jaws stopped me dead in my tracks as I entered Great Britain's exhibit at the 1991 Prague Quadrennial. I had grown accustomed to the welcoming exhibits from other nations, exhibitions that were formal and elegant. This was not. This was startling and rough. Transfixed by this large stuffed canine, I wondered what the exhibit was all about.

Then my eyes swept over the entire display space. The walls were black, splattered with mud that reached about a foot up from the earth-colored, sand-strewn floor. I could feel the grit under my feet and hear it crunch as I stepped further into the room. In front of me I saw some unexpected sights: a pillar of crushed metal parts, a stack of dirty, old, black truck tires, some battered aluminum garbage cans, a rubble pile of red bricks and a huge black plastic garbage bag. Each of these unlikely materials served to present a series of brilliant theatrical models and renderings.

I was perplexed by what seemed more appropriate for a gallery exhibit of found objects than for a presentation of theatrical designs. The manner of presentation—the "installation," as I came to think of it—was clearly making a strong statement and I responded enthusiastically to its power and excitement. I tried to understand what I was seeing, but I came up with too many possible explanations for these extraordinary images. Rather than go off on some overly intellectualized or theoretical analysis (which would probably be way off base anyway), I sought out Pamela Howard, one of the exhibit designers and I besieged her with questions.

Her answers set me at ease. Theatre is

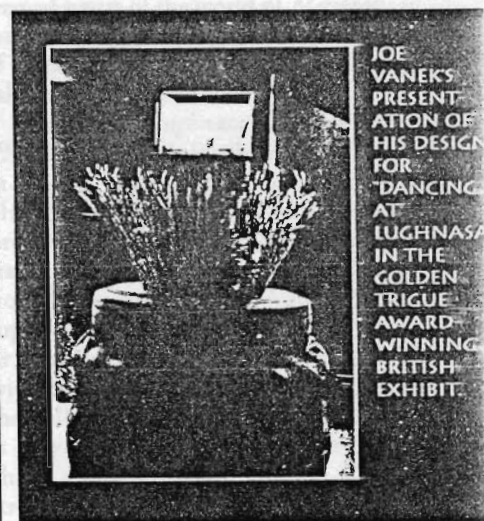
temporary, she explained. Theatre goes into the dumpster when the show is over. The finest design, like the finest of theatrical experiences, is ephemeral. This was the theme of the exhibit, a theme which provided the seven artists representing Great Britain with a guide as to how to present their designs in their allotted space. As I raised an eyebrow in the direction of what appeared to me to be a wolf devouring a photograph, Howard cheerily informed me, "We don't take ourselves seriously."

To my great relief, none of the participating designers intended to make a pompous philosophical treatise on the nature of ART. Indeed, I wondered fancifully if they had been asked for examples of their work to include in the exhibition, had replied that they didn't have anything around because it had all been thrown out, then thought what an appropriate metaphor that act of trashing their work was, and finally had the clever notion to present their work "as trashed." From this playful notion they determined to present their brilliant and exciting designs in a challenging and entertaining installation that brought them the *Golden Trigue* Award.

The *Trigue* is awarded for the Best National Exhibition and the judges consider both the theatrical designs included in the exhibit and the overall presentation of the installation. There are 12 judges appointed by the organizers of the Prague Quadrennial, in conjunction with the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic's Minister of Culture. This year's judges were international in their representation, with one each from Bohemia and Slovakia and the other ten being non-Czechoslovakian. This understanding of the judges' criteria suggests why Great Britain's exhibit was victorious. In 1987, the US won the *Golden Trigue* for its exhibit of four designers' studios; John Conklin was the

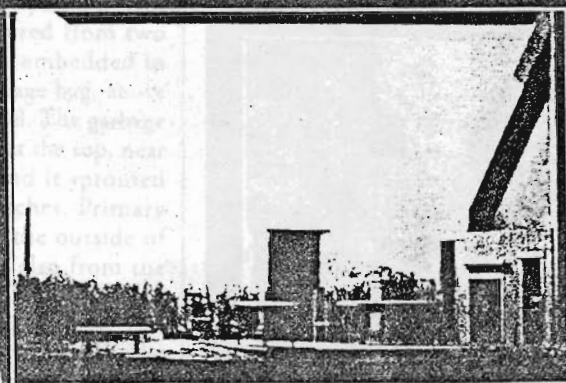
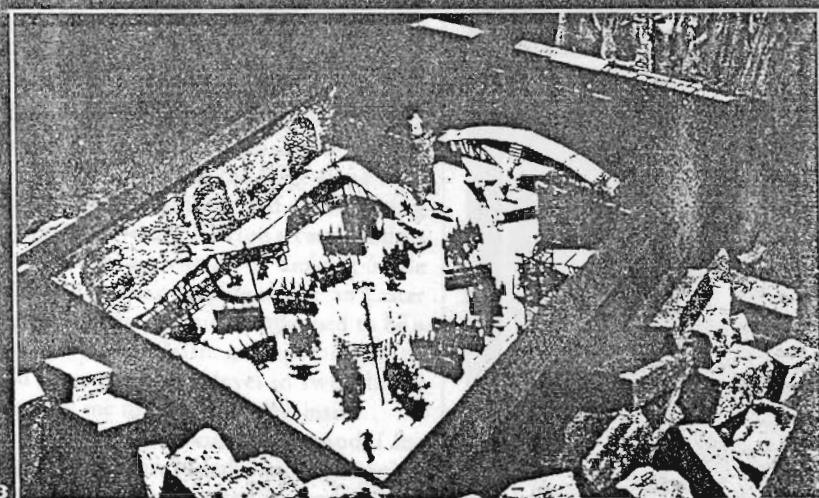
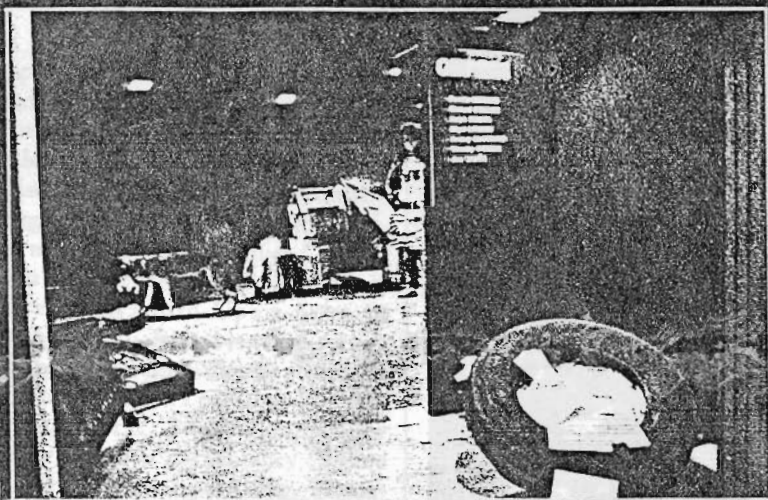
designer of the exhibit. Great Britain's 1991 exhibit included the finest examples of recent work by some world-class designers and Howard's installation was both arresting and evocative. While a thousand of my words will not be equal to the experience of viewing these designs and this installation, perhaps the reader will grasp something of the impact of this award-winning exhibition if I describe each of the designer's works in turn.

Oedipus Rex was the production being eaten by the "wolf," which Howard assured me was actually a large dog. On



JOE VANEK'S PRESENTATION OF HIS DESIGN FOR "DANCING AT LUGHNASSA" IN THE GOLDEN TRIGUE AWARD WINNING BRITISH EXHIBIT.

the floor of the exhibition space was a series of five separate light boxes illuminating photographs of Nigel Lowery's designs for the English National Opera's January 1991 production in London of Igor Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*. These photos revealed a set which was dominated by two huge white screens, converging upstage in forced perspective, against which shadowed figures were cast. Since light was a major element in his design, Lowery chose to exhibit production photographs illuminated in light boxes rather than to display a model or rendering.



1. THE ENTRY WAY TO THE BRITISH EXHIBIT.
2. "OEDIPUS REX" BY NIGEL LOWERY.
3. "JOHN BROWN'S BODY" BY PAMELA HOWARD.
4. "DANCING AT LUGHNASA" BY JOE VANEK.

Photographs are the most easily discarded record of a design and the fate of such photos, tossed into the garbage, is to be eaten by scavenging dogs. Lowery's theatrical design was exciting; its presentation was both consistent with the exhibition's theme and sufficiently vital to have stopped me in my tracks when I first entered Great Britain's exhibition area.

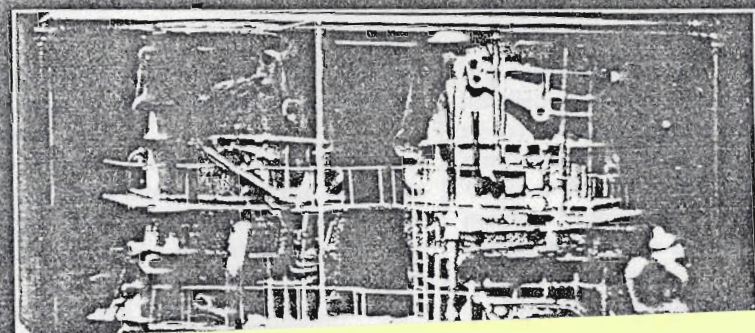
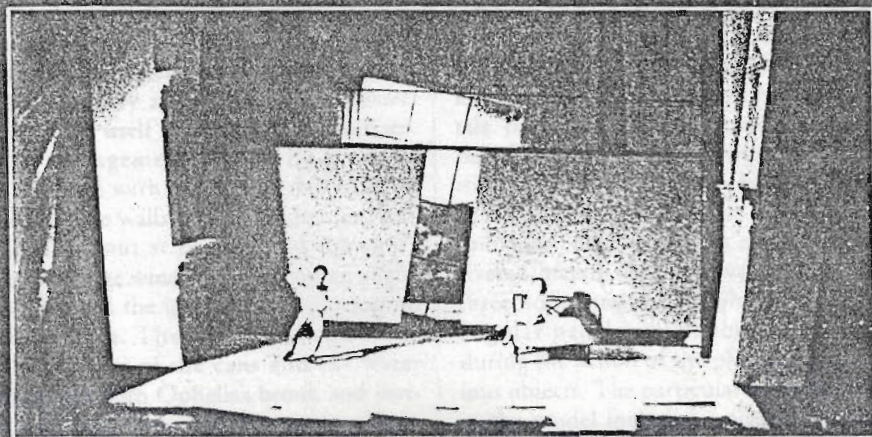
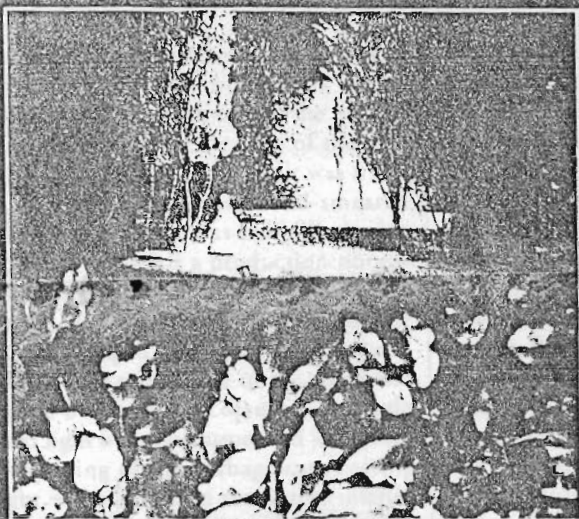
Ralph Koltai's model for *Metropolis*, produced in London at the Piccadilly Theatre in March 1989, represented a setting composed of twin gleaming silver and brass gargantuan machines joined by catwalks, bisected by tubing and valves. During the action of the play, the set opened up on to a grassy background and the predominantly metallic construct of the industrial age gave way to the pastoral environment of the natural world. The model was displayed as a freestanding piece of sculpture, not inside of a model box, and I was able to view it from all angles. It rested on the top of a T-shaped stand composed entirely of crushed chromium and brass car parts which had been compacted into two rectangular blocks forming the vertical and horizontal bars of the T-shaped industrial stand. As with the other designs in this exhibition, the context for viewing simultaneously extended the materials and "feel" of the design and subscribed to the governing theme. In this case, the metallic car parts seemed a part of the world of *Metropolis* as much as they were at one with the world of discarded rubbish which expressed the exhibition's theme.

Dancing at Lughnasa was designed in 1990 by Joe Vaněk for the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. The production is currently playing in London and will open on Broadway in October 1991. Its commercial success must result, in no small part, from this exciting design. Vaněk's model suggests a set that is an interior and exterior simultaneously—a raked wheat field with poppies, the edge of which defines the wall of the downstage left room which is filled with rough-hewn oak tables, chairs and a cupboard and has a straw-strewn floor. The perimeters of the set are defined by high stucco-textured white walls ombred with ochre. The design is presented in a model box which appears to perch magically on the tops of tall, slender shafts of real wheat with red poppies interspersed. This vertical column of vegetation grows out of the center of a stack of three used and dirty truck tires. This poetical presentation vibrates with the same poetical style that informs Brian Friel's Irish script. Friel writes of an Ireland torn apart by war. Vaněk's design shows agrarian Hope (the wheat and pop-

pies) springing from the debris of industrialized War (the tires).

Timothy O'Brien's two models for *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Twelfth Night* are reminiscent of both the Impressionistic paintings of Claude Monet and the landscapes of Gustav Klimt. *Love's Labour's Lost* was done for the Royal Shakespeare Theatre at Stratford-Upon-Avon in September 1990; Terry Hands directed. The scene design immediately reminded me of Claude Monet's painting *The Parc Monceau, Paris*. O'Brien's summertime landscape has all of the vibrancy effected by Monet's style of painting. Three-dimensional trees line each side of the stage, entirely spattered with irregular paint spots in greens, violets, reds and pinks. The backdrop and floor are painted in the same style. The design is presented in a model box which is wreathed with three-dimensional foliage which has been given the same paint-spattered treatment.

O'Brien's design for the Peter Hall production of *Twelfth Night* was produced in London at The Playhouse in February 1991. This model of a landscape was similarly treated to the repeated use of paint-spattered foliage. It differed from his *Love's Labour's Lost* in two ways: by evoking an autumnal rather than a vernal season and by incorporating architectural wall units the full height of the proscenium on each side of the stage. Upstage was a landscape of vertical trees, both two and three dimensional, reminiscent of Gustav Klimt's *Birnbaum* in hue, value, intensity and broken color surfaces. These autumnal trees had littered the stage floor with leaves. I had a unique and entertaining experience with O'Brien's two models because they are viewed by looking inside a container—like peeping inside an Easter egg—only this container happened to be a gigantic black plastic garbage bag which had been slit at eye level in two places



Galvanized aluminum garbage cans and lids covered with rainbow-hued paint drippings displayed Antony McDonald's color photographs of his model for *As You Like It*, done in London at the Old Vic Theatre in May 1989. The photos showed the five variations of the set, an abstraction in red, black, gray and white with paint drippings on the upstage wall. The photos were paper clipped to large pieces of illustration board which protruded from the garbage cans along with other painted chunks of cardboard. These were all of the try-out bits the designer had used as he reworked his ideas until the design was "right." These and the designs themselves had then all been discarded.

The Royal Shakespeare production of *Hamlet* at Stratford-upon-Avon in April 1989 was also designed by Antony McDonald. The presentation of this design also utilized garbage cans (this time painted a reddish brown like rust or dried blood) and it employed several media. Two garbage cans: the bottom one stood upright with its lid lying next to it on the floor and there were red on white photographs of the production pasted on it, some of which had been partially torn away. The top garbage can had its lid in place and the whole can rested horizontally on the opening of the vertical can. The

side of the horizontal can had been cut away allowing the model box to be embedded into the can so that the proscenium was flush with the edge of the can. Sitting next to this stacked unit was a single, similarly rusted and blood-smeared garbage can which was half filled with water and in which a production photograph of Gertrude and Claudius, also printed in red-on white, floated near the bottom. Draped over the side of the can and partially submerged in the water was a piece of Hamlet's costume. A single naked light bulb was suspended just above the opening of the garbage can, casting bright white light into the watery interior of the can. The common thematic idea that a design goes into the garbage after the production is finished was effectively and directly related in this instance to the visual imagery associated with *Hamlet*. The model itself represented the unit setting's arrangement for Act III Scene 4, stark white with black and red accents. The massive walls of this mechanized setting tilted out at the top and the enormous upstage window canted on an angle. This set had the impact of employing no right angles. The blood-red color, the hard surfaces of the cans and the water which was both Ophelia's brook and society's detritus combined to make an evoca-

tive extension of McDonald's setting for *Hamlet*. As there is something rotten in Hamlet's Denmark, so the design, no longer needed, is relegated to the trash heap where everything rots.

Richard Hudson's designs for both *A Clockwork Orange* and *Too Clever By Half* provided a personalized variation on the theme of "Into The Garbage Can." *A Clockwork Orange*, produced by the RSC at the Barbican Theatre in London, February 1990, was displayed on two pristine, bright and shiny, upright aluminum garage cans with their lids resting against their sides. The interior of one can had been painted with primary red enamel paint. On the bottom of the red can was a close-up black-and-white portrait photograph of a man wearing extremely high-tech, machine-like eyewear of the futurist kind we associate with Anthony Burgess' tale. In the top of the adjacent garbage can rested the model box, positioned so that the black framed proscenium opening was looking out at me. The set itself was one immense curved red gloss enamel wall of riveted metal. This wall was divided into three horizontal bands composed of rectangular panels which could slide open during the action of the play to reveal various objects. The particular scene depicted in the model included a gigantic realistic

white milk bottle aimed at an enormous white bust of Beethoven.

Theatre went into the garbage can again with *Too Clever By Half*, an Ostrovsky play designed by Richard Hudson in June 1988 at the Old Vic in London. One shiny new trash can contained photographs and rolls of drafting. A second can, similarly pristine, contained the model, lying on its back, so that I had to peer over the edge of the can to view it. The wide false proscenium, which was a realized element of the design, was covered with a Soviet newspaper (Ostrovsky is a Russian playwright). The color of the entire set was yellow ochre. The set was extraordinarily deep, with walls, ceiling and floor in sharply forced perspective; at the back, it looked like the designer had splashed a gigantic can of black paint. Along the stage left wall was a single row of simple chairs. Probably the most remarkable feature of the set was the skewed angles—nothing was parallel to the floor of the theatre. The entire stage floor was steeply raked from stage right down to stage left, which caused the actors in performance to stand on a severe angle. Anyone who saw Hudson's Tony-nominated design for *La Bête* will appreciate the vitality and theatricality of Hudson's designs. As Hudson's designs are

pristine and elegant, so too are the garbage cans into which he jettisons his work.

Pamela Howard's tri-part exhibit (enormous model, rendering and large figure from the actual production) was her designs for *John Brown's Body*, a new play by John McGrath which has nothing to do with the American work based on Stephen Vincent Benet's poem. Howard worked with the playwright, developing the script in relation to her visualizations. Howard and McGrath subsequently co-directed the production at the Tramway Theatre in Glasgow in February 1990. The title refers to the name of the defunct John Brown Shipyards in Glasgow. Therefore, the "body" is a metaphor for the dead shipyards. This is a very political play and deals with consumerism. It is epic in scale, spanning 1760 to 1919 and the action is set in numerous locales. The site for this production, the Tramway Theatre in Glasgow, was used previously for Peter Brook's production of *The Mahabharata*. The building, which was not built as a theatre, had been completely gutted and was empty. The first task for Howard then was to lay the floor. Since the building was an empty red brick shell, Howard had the opportunity to define the audience/acting areas. She placed the act-

ing areas against all four walls and installed a central platform and four additional mobile stages. This is somewhat reminiscent of Ronconi's design for his *Orlando Furioso*. The audience of 600 moved throughout the space in small groups in what the British call a "Promenade Performance."

Howard's design expressed the idea that consumerism is like a carnival which takes your money and gives you little in return but diverting lights that flash and wheels that spin. The set for *John Brown's Body* was a giant roller coaster surrounding the audience and a giant carnival wheel at one end of the immense hall and a recreation of the set for Mayakovsky's *The Bathhouse* at the other. The carnival wheel lit up at the end of the performance and green lights chased along the edge of the roller coaster platform. In front of the carnival wheel was a larger-than-life-sized figure of a woman in a ragged white gown with oversized blue hands cradling three gaunt white heads. This large figure represented the Mother and illustrated what happens when you cannot pay the rent, when you get thrown out (like garbage?) and when you must work to feed your children until your hands turn blue. Howard's homage to Vladimir Mayakovsky at the opposite end of the hall—

and I was aware that Mayakovsky's play satirizes Soviet bureaucracy—was her metaphoric reminder that the spirit of the Soviet Union in the 1920s parallels that of Glasgow today. Glasgow, the European capitol of the arts for 1991, reminds Howard of the creative vitality of post-revolutionary Soviet Russia.

The acting areas in Howard's design served for the play's multiple locales and were utilized by the co-directors effectively. The four moving stages provided additional, simultaneous and more specific locales and were moved into the arena at various points in the production. These locales included a locomotive, a bus, a flat wagon and a sailboat which was identified as "Keir Hardie to the Rescue for West Ham South."


The style of the design and performance was extremely presentational and theatrical. For example, when three men in yellow slickers entered on one of the moving platforms which served as a little boat, an actor standing high above them threw real water down on them to create a storm scene.

Howard's design and presentation may best exemplify the highly theatrical designs and installation which led the judges to award the coveted Golden Trigue to the exhibit from Great Britain.

Howard's panoramic rendering for the set was traditionally framed and mounted on the exhibition wall, while the large female figure stood in a corner overlooking the gigantic model—gigantic because the design encompassed the entire building in which the production had been performed. The entire presentation rested on a mound of red bricks imported to Prague from Glasgow. As Howard shared with me, the bricks expressed the renaissance of Glasgow and the hope that out of a universe of rubble, theatre may once again arise. Theatre designs may become trash, but from trash comes theatre—the cycle of life is the cycle of theatre.

The Golden Trigue is not the only award given by the judges of the Prague Quadrennial. In addition, awards are commonly given in Scenography, Costume Design, Theatre Architecture and Theme—this year's theme was "Mozart." In each of these four categories, a Gold Medal, a Silver Medal and one or more Honorable Mentions may be awarded. The US exhibit of "Mozart in America," designed by Eric Fielding, won a Gold Medal for "Theme" this year. But The Golden Trigue is the most respected and in 1991 it was awarded to the exhibition from Great Britain. The strong visual statement chosen by the participating

designers was of course controversial. Many people felt that the installation/presentation overwhelmed the designs. However, there seem to me very clear reasons why the British exhibit won the Golden Trigue. The judges this year were not drawn from the old guard, but were the Young Turks of the design world and therefore more attracted to unconventional work. The coherence of the installation must have been a significant factor in the decision. The winning American exhibit of four years before had also been a highly dramatic presentation, so it seems evident, at least in part, that the decision is influenced by the artistry of the presentation. And it is equally true that the quality of the individual designs exhibited was of the highest caliber.

And I cannot overlook the fact that the British exhibit was playful and a great deal of theatrical "fun." In Prague, Czechoslovakia, a city and nation newly reacquainted with the energy of political freedom and the joy of spiritual awakening, perhaps this exhibition of theatrical freedom was an appropriate winner. 

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