



THE 1991 PRAGUE QUADRENNIAL

COSTUME AT PQ'91: ONE DESIGNER'S PERSPECTIVE

BY JEANNIE DAVIDSON

This discussion of the costume elements in the PQ'91 will be a very personal and very general report; my focus was almost exclusively on those elements of the exhibit that appealed to my personal interests. My comments are simply a few general remarks about some selected features of the exhibit that were particularly memorable to me. These observations, then, are not so much a review of the costume aspects of the exhibit as they are notes from one designer's perspective.

The most striking quality of the PQ exhibit was the degree of emphasis on the display methods for presenting the design work. Although this was also a feature of PQ'87, it appeared to assume a greater importance for the exhibitors this year. Many of the national exhibits (Great Britain and Finland most notably) focused on the installation or the environmental sculpture in which the design work was displayed to the extent that at times it assumed greater importance both visually and in terms of its emotional impact and statement. I am unclear why this seemed to be a trend, but in some cases the effort put into creating the surround both outshone and swallowed up the design pieces on display. There is no adverse criticism intended here, but I was interested to know just what I was looking at sometimes; viewing the exhibit became more of a personal experience than something one could look at and know what sort of work was being done on stage except by inference.

In the Finnish exhibit in particular it was often difficult to find the design work within a rather dour and depressing black plastic-wrapped organic environment through which you wandered. There were fragmented images through-

out and it was impossible at times to tell which were elements from some production and which were elements which were created as part of the installation environment itself. This frightening, sullen black plastic world was evocative and fascinating in the extreme, but I left it feeling I had not understood much of what was being produced in Finland, only thinking that they probably don't see enough of the sun.

The British exhibit seemed spare: there seemed to be few works on display and the installation of the work, if it was not more interesting, at least appeared to receive more attention or carry more weight than the design work per se. You entered the exhibit to see a series of lighting instruments on the floor and a stuffed (real) wolf or dog. A group of scenic models viewed by peeking into holes cut into the sides of a large black plastic mound sat in the center of the room. Other models were stuffed at odd angles into paint-splashed garbage cans. I am certain some comment was intended; I don't dare to guess what it was.

This tendency to create an environmental sculpture within which the design works were seen seemed to be strongest among the European displays and it certainly was by no means universal. The American display of Mozart

works was perhaps as straightforward, perhaps traditional in terms of approach to presenting the work as anything in the exhibit. Here the individual design work was clearly the focus and was presented in a well-composed, clear format: the elements of the display structure

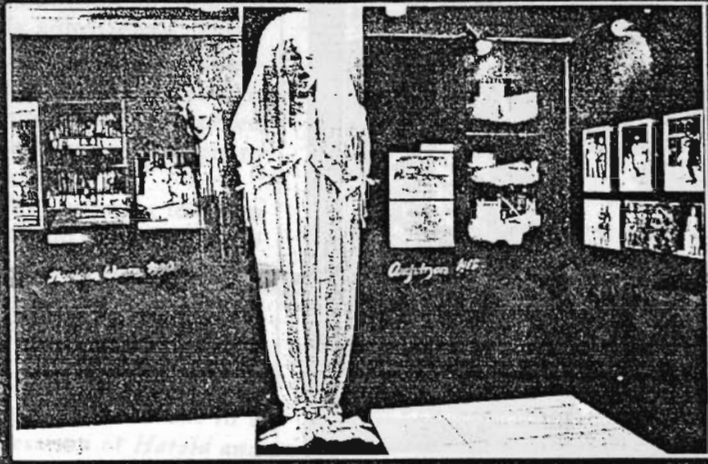


COLLAGE COSTUME RENDERING FOR "COSI FAN TUTTE" BY DUMITRU POPESCU IN THE RUMANIAN MOZART EXHIBIT

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were simply a frame for the design work and did not make a statement other than to organize and support the work.

One would expect such a large international exhibit to present clear representations of national character or per-



sonality and this seemed to be far more evident in the displays of PQ'91 than in the PQ'87 exhibit. More interesting to me than specific design work was what the exhibits displayed of national temperament, mood or state of mind and these aspects often were clear simply from the approach to presenting the work. No where was this more evident than in contrasting the Brazilian exhibit which featured brightly colored carnival costumes, with the Finnish exhibit in which it was difficult to untangle the theatrical pieces displayed from the maudlin environmental sculpture. The Japanese exhibit was placed in a two-story wooden frame construction as carefully considered as any packaging done by a people for whom the aesthetics of packaging are as important as the care lavished upon the gift itself. It would be foolish to assume that what is displayed is representative of the range of work in each country, but a great deal is said by what is chosen to represent that country for purposes of this exhibit.

In the eastern and northern European exhibits particularly there seemed to be a preponderance of confusing, tortured or disturbing images. These tended to be organized loosely or in some organic fashion; their impact was more emotional than cerebral and they created more of an impression or mood than a display of design work per se. On the opposite side of the coin, the American and Asian exhibits were laid out in a clear, precise, almost businesslike fashion. Almost absent from the exhibit was a focus on the traditions of national folk costume that were so evident in several of the displays of PQ'87; some elements of the Swedish exhibit, the work from China and Japan and Brazil's carnival costumes were exceptions.

There seemed to be fewer three-dimensional pieces in the '91 exhibit. I suspect less funding, especially in eastern Europe. There was greater textural richness in the exhibit four years ago, if I recall correctly. Perhaps this simplification is a matter of reduced funding or perhaps it reflects a change in values or interest on the part of directors and designers. Curiously, there were a rather large number of puppets in the displays of several countries, specifically in the Czech national exhibit which was housed at the Narodni Divadlo (National Theatre), the Polish exhibit and others. I would think that puppetry received a large share of attention in these countries, or perhaps they simply make for a more interesting or easily assembled display. In any case, it was sometimes diffi-

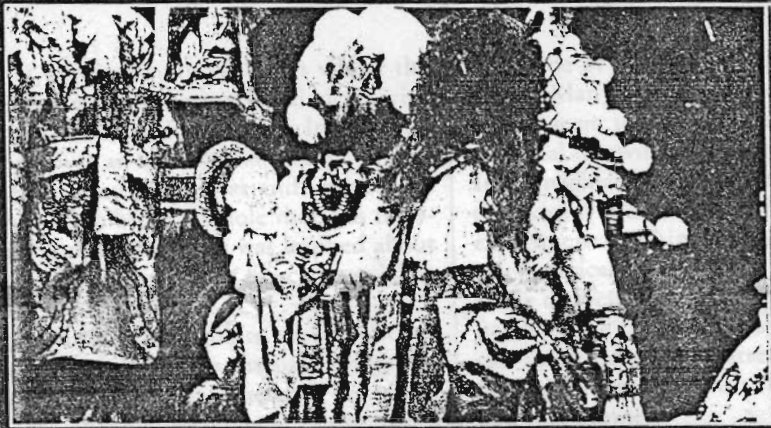
cult to ascertain how the costuming of the live actor is approached. Many exhibits contained large numbers of artful and loosely rendered costume sketches and few photographs of costumed actors or three dimensional pieces to show the final product.

It is personally important to me to understand how we do things differently from and similarly to designers in other cultures. It is always difficult to assess the design work itself and compare it to our own expectations or approaches unless the work is known. It is possible to see what might be different in a Japanese interpretation of *Harold and Maude* from a single photo and extrapolate from there. Or we can understand what was done with anything by Shakespeare, Shaw, Chekov or the Greeks. We can see national tastes and tendencies that are consistent in design choices for plays we know.

But it becomes impossible to sort out what was done or why with a new or obscure play not known outside its country of origin. National exhibits that largely featured plays not generally known or produced were therefore difficult to put into any kind of context. We are not always able to assess the nature of the interpretation and judge how this might differ from the general range of approach that would be familiar to us in our own cultural context.

I suspect that the differences seen in costume rendering techniques may suggest something about differences in working methods and how theatres are structured. I believe that to a large extent American designers tend to do renderings more for the shop than to create an impressionistic statement of the costume. We tend to render for clarity of information. I am suggesting only that this tendency has developed out of necessity. A large number of American designers work on several shows at once and are not often in residence at any one theatre for the entire pre-production period. Clarity of rendering for communication purposes has become very important in order to help the designer communicate to the shop what is wanted in the clearest way possible. I believe the tendency to view the sketch primarily as a tool for communication to be a feature of how we work in order to get the results we intend. Economic conditions (the need to work several shows at once) have influenced the development of a style of rendering we tend to use, if not prefer.

By contrast, many of the national displays presented costume renderings



1. COSTUMES FOR "THE PHOENICIAN WOMEN" DESIGNED BY ANGELOS ANGELI (CYPRUS).
2. COSTUME RENDERING FOR "PENTHESILIA" BY VOLKER PFÜLLER (GERMANY).
3. COSTUME RENDERING FOR "THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO" BY JOHANNES GRÜTZKE (GERMANY).
4. COSTUME RENDERING FOR "A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM" BY NELLY VÁGÓ (HUNGARY).
5. THE FRENCH EXHIBIT.
6. CARNIVAL COSTUMES FROM BRAZIL.
7. COSTUME RENDERING FOR "CENEAN" BY LIZ MORDEN (RUMANIA).
8. COSTUME RENDERING FOR "THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO" BY SUSAN BENSON (CANADA).
9. COSTUME BY BYUNG BOK LEE (KOREA), RECIPIENT OF A "DIPLOMA OF HONOR" FOR COSTUME DESIGN.

that are so impressionistic that you could not put them into a typical American shop and expect anyone to know what to do. This suggests to me that either designers in these countries work with well-trained assistants with whom they have a more than fleeting relationship (rare in the American regional theatre) or that the designer is in residence and available to the shop continuously to provide interpretation and make decisions throughout the production process. Perhaps the build period is more process oriented than our typical shop situation where there is little room or funding to develop the final product in an experimental fashion. Or perhaps the design work as an individual statement of a particular artist is less important to individual artists and the responsibility for controlling the details of realization is shared with assistants and associates.

I believe that much of this has been true in varying degrees for state-supported theatres and it will be interesting to see if there is a change in the future. It is also possible that some of these very loosely rendered sketches are not even intended for presentation to a shop, but are meant for display or work with the director. Sometimes, of course, there is

that extraordinary synthesis where the sketch as information is balanced with the idea of the sketch as art. In any case, there was an extraordinary range of rendering methods, styles and approaches in the exhibit as a whole that was interesting to me for what was implied about how designers must function within their theatres.

The student exhibits, tucked unceremoniously down in the parking garage of the Culture Palace, actually contained some of the most adventuresome work. This will always be the case with work that is not produced, since economic constraints are not an issue. This section of the exhibit also provided some extraordinary insights into the training of young designers. American training methods tend to focus, I believe, on script analysis and interpretation, the uses of research, concept development and production process. It also seems that we may have less stringent standards in what we demand of students in the way of drawing and technical skills. What I saw of many of the European design schools led me to believe that whole sections of study are spent simply in developing creativity and the visual imagination apart from the theatrical

discipline or the business of producing shows. Many of the study exercises on display seem to be calculated to develop technical (drawing) skills or free the creative imagination and expand the ability to envision and observe in ways that are experimental, whimsical and impractical. American design training, I believe, tends to focus on what is practical and possible. We try to teach as much as we can about how the theatre operates and how to function within that structure and that business.

I have made certain suppositions and generalizations about how things are based on my observations and I apologize for any ignorance of the facts or limitations of scope. Aside from my personal fascination with what designers are doing with textural and painted effects in costume, of which I saw relatively little, the most notable feature of the PQ'91 exhibit was what the displays had to say about how we work, what we value and how we are feeling about the world. □

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The British exhibit...
 selected to be the work...
 and the installation...
 of the work, the...
 was... more interesting...
 at least appeared to...
 receive more attention of...
 carry more weight than...
 the design work per se.

...the exhibit...
 a series of lighting...
 instruments on the floor...
 in a stuffed (read) wall...
 A group of scenic...
 models viewed by peeking...
 into holes cut into the...
 sides of a large black...
 plastic mound set in the...
 center of the space...
 Other models were stuffed...
 at odd angles into...
 paint-splashed garbage...
 cans. I am certain some...
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