

contents

Introduction	7
Arnold Aronson	
A Theatre Of Ghosts?: Some Thoughts Relating to the Representation of Art and Scenography	17
Thea Brejzek	
Exhibiting Scenography: The Loss of the Artifact	27
Arnold Aronson	
State of Crisis: Theatre Architecture Performing Badly	41
Dorita Hannah	
Critical Responses to PQ 07 Thoughts on PQ 07 – and PQs to Come	51
Ian Herbert	
A Case For New Approaches To Scenographic Exhibition (and a look at contemporary German design)	
Thomas Irmer	
The Prague Quadrennial's Journey into the 21st Century	
Marie Zdeňková	
Photogallery	65
Participating countries and regions	105
Awards	108
List of Illustrations	109

introduction

Given the sheer amount of design in one place, one might expect to come away with some sense of where theatre design (sets, costumes, lights, projection, sound, and new technologies) and theatre architecture is today, and where it is heading. And indeed, that was the original intent of this book. Six critics and scholars (myself included) were asked to use the contents of the 11th Prague Quadrennial as a starting point for a broader discussion of scenography and theatre architecture: to search for trends, to look for national or regional similarities, to assess the current state of the art. But a funny thing happened in the process. Everyone, with the exception of Dorita Hannah, whose essay focused on the need to re-evaluate theatre architecture, wrote about the problematics of exhibition and display

while recording personal responses to individual exhibits and designers.

There are two possible reasons for this. The simple one is that perhaps there were no clear trends to discuss, or that whatever trends were discernible, they were not significantly different than they have been through recent times. Certainly, there was nothing that suggested a radical shift in the approach to design for the stage. Although the work of a great number of excellent designers was on display, there was no one who leapt out as an astonishing new talent. João Mendes Ribeiro, who won the Gold Medal for set design, was a revelation to many at the PQ—but at least in part because he has worked primarily within Portugal and thus is little-



Portugal – Architecture on Stage



João Mendes Ribeiro – Peter Handke:
The Hour When We Knew Nothing of Each Other



Industrial Palace – Prague Quadrennial 2007

known elsewhere. The entire Portuguese exhibition was devoted to his work, which was superbly and inventively exhibited. While Ribeiro's work was uniformly excellent, and even startling, much of it fell within the architectural tradition of scenography of the latter part of the 20th century, and could therefore be seen as a superb example of an existing genre. In other words, outstanding work, but not a new trend.

The other reason for all of us in this collection to focus on the exhibition rather than the individual work is that the PQ itself is a performance. Consequently, I believe, the spectacle of the event and its own scenography tended to overwhelm the content within it. The liminal space—and time—of the exhibition absorbed everything within it into an all-encompassing festival environment. The carnival atmosphere was enhanced by a constant cacophony of sound—from the various pavilions, from the PQ Bar, from the performances occurring at various sites around the exhibition hall¹. Sometimes the noise made focusing on the individual exhibition items near impossible. Hierarchical and categorical structures evaporated for these 10 days into a totalizing scenographic experience.

A more conservative view might find an analogy between the exhibition and a museum. Like an exhibition, a museum displays artifacts and makes presentations. But visually, spatially, and narratively it faces different issues. In most museums, the architecture functions as a shell containing the artwork (or other artifacts and exhibits) within. Most museums of any size are segmented into rooms, each containing a group of work unified by some organizing feature—artist, period, genre, country, function, etc. No matter how ornate or architecturally interesting the museum is—think of St. Petersburg's Hermitage—the focus

is always on the display, with the shell in most cases no more than a momentary distraction; the contents of the museum are the unifying force. The visitor's movement through the museum, often dictated by arrows, sequential numbers, or the architecture itself, creates a particular narrative. As with any narrative structure, it reflects the intention of the "author"—in this case the museum director or curator.

The Industrial Palace, however, the Art Nouveau exhibition hall that houses the PQ, has its own identity, separate from any particular exhibition. Throughout the year, for instance, this same space hosts trade fairs, book fairs, industrial fairs, and even philately and numismatics gatherings. The hall, therefore, has a character greater than its ever-changing contents. In order for any one exhibition to establish an independent identity it must create a narrative cohesion distinct from other exhibitions, and it must be capable of either neutralizing or incorporating the larger environment. In the case of the PQ, each national exhibit was allocated a limited range of floor space, but beyond that there was no aesthetic unity to the pavilions². They were a pastiche of shapes, heights, colors, with varying relationships to the Industrial Palace ranging from the totally enclosed space to the totally open. Although there was, for the first time in the PQ's 40-year history, an attempt to create a visual unity and emblematic motif for the exhibition, it was only partially successful. Raised plywood walkways painted pink functioned as "streets," with pavilions arranged on either side—though, as critic Ian Herbert has noted, this device was not fully developed and the color inevitably made it a site for dirty foot prints and scuff marks. These pathways regulated the movement of spectators to some extent, but it created no real narrative since the arrangement of exhibits was essentially random³. The very purpose and content of



USA – New Voices, New Visions: Out of the Box

the PQ, of course, creates a thematic harmony: every exhibit is displaying some form of performance design and architecture, but each pavilion tells its own story in its own way. The multiplicity of languages heard at the PQ was not limited to verbal communication; it was as if each country had its own scenographic vocabulary and grammar.

Juxtaposition has its own appeal. A spectator can move from stage sets to costumes, from opera to dance to circus, from conceptual and interactive pavilions to ones making political statements, from exhibits of video projections and computer monitors to conventional displays of scenic artifacts and photographic images. In that sense the PQ is an unintentional example of postmodernism. But the disjuncture that is a hallmark of postmodernism, together with its erasure of aesthetic hierarchies, means that it is this very disunity that will have the greatest impact upon the visitor. Each entry into or exit from a pavilion creates an aesthetic rupture. What the audience comes away with is a memory of individual pavilions more than their contents, random individual images or artifacts, or even an ill-defined sense of chaos within a vast exhibition hall. It is this sensibility that is reflected in the essays in this book.

If there had been some consistency, some recurring motif, some overarching theme, then it might have been possible to discuss trends or developments in stage design or theatre architecture. (By theme, here, I mean something that emerges organically from the approach to the work, rather than the externally imposed themes of past PQs, which I will discuss below.) But, as Foucault noted almost 40 years ago, "what has become important is no longer resemblances but identities and differences." [Foucault, 50] PQ 07 was, in many ways, a celebration of differences.

Politics and economics play a significant role in the PQ. By politics I include the overt and literal kind, as well as the unexamined subtexts and assumptions that determine the shape and content, and even the definition of theatre. The economic factors are fairly straightforward. Money has an impact on the theatrical resources of any country, and the material available for documentation varies according to these economic factors. Finances have a more direct effect on exhibiting at the PQ. It costs money to organize and transport an exhibit with its attendant costs of insurance, personnel, equipment, display structures, construction, and so forth. European nations which can load their exhibits into a truck and drive to Prague have an advantage over those which must transport their work overseas. In theory, wealthy nations have an advantage over the less wealthy, but this is sometimes obviated by government support or lack thereof. During the Cold War, Soviet client states often had lavish exhibits out of all proportion to their true economies, but culture was a weapon in the ideological wars. For at least some Western countries, however, particularly the United States, the relative invisibility of the PQ outside of a narrow constituency of the international theatre world, made financial support for this event a very low priority. These countries chose to spend their cultural capital in other ways. Today, public and private support for the arts, especially theatre, is diminishing in many places around the world. As a result, some of the better-funded exhibitors of past PQs, such as Germany, Great Britain, and the Scandinavian countries struggled; France did not even participate due to lack of funding. At the extreme end of the spectrum was Venezuela, which was forced to withdraw at the last moment when promised government support did not materialize. (The PQ Catalogue, which included Venezuela, had already been printed. Anyone reading the catalogue in