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Christian M. Billing |

Review of

Josef Svoboda:

Scenographer by Helena Albertová.

Praha: Divadelní ústav, 2008. 328 pages.

This book is a welcome addition to the existing bibliography addressing the work of Josef Svoboda (1920-2002). The reasons for this are twofold: (i) it is well written and informative, and (ii) it is the only work currently in print (in either Czech or English) that covers the entirety of Svoboda's work – including his final designs for the *Laterna Magika* in 2002. As a result, Albertová's volume justifiably takes its place amongst the other key analytical works dealing with this significant figure in global scenography of the twentieth century (i.e. the major studies by Bablet, Burian, Berjozkin and Ptáčková).

Albertová's book is organised into five sections, dealing respectively with Svoboda's formative years (and informal training); his development of projection techniques (in 1958 and afterwards); Svoboda's opera and ballet productions on the major stages of the world; his later collaborations (with mainly younger practitioners); and his unfulfilled projects. The book also supplies (as one of two appendices) a useful chronology giving production details for over 650 theatre and opera designs, as well as additional scenographic details of film and television productions, designs for expositions and audio-visual installations, and three projects for major theatre buildings. The vast majority of designs in the chronology (as elsewhere

in the book) have useful visual records of settings, if it is at all possible to provide them.

Notwithstanding the thoroughness of these chronological appendices, to observe that coverage of the total creative output of Svoboda in the book as a whole is virtually complete would certainly be true; more important, however, is the insightfulness with which Albertová discusses many of the key productions, and her analysis of the development of the designer's style. Taken together, an informative and accurate overarching narrative allows a picture to emerge of a meticulously thorough craftsman and artist, developing and then reworking his ideas towards perfection as both his own skills as a scenographer and, more often, the quality of materials available to him, improved.

One such example comes in the account of Svoboda's designs for Janáček's comic opera *The Excursions of Mr Brouček*. In this opera, a respectable Prague citizen (Brouček) experiences a drunken dream in which he arrives on the Moon (see also Pamela Howard's essay in this volume, p. 292). Svoboda's first attempt at designing the setting reveals a fascinating idea hindered by a paucity of theatrical materials: in the middle of the stage, circling spirals in the shape of constellations were made up of rather clunky rostra. In a subsequent design of 1959 for the *Národní (Smetanovo) Divadlo*, (National (Smetana) Theatre) Prague, Svoboda reworked his original design with what was, at that time, a new material – hardened glass laminate; from this substance he created a revolve and two overhead gangways in the shape of spirals, wound against each other and offset by projections of astral space in which balls hung like planets. Albertová observes of the latter production: 'It is an example

of how Svoboda returned to a vision with whose realisation he had been dissatisfied in order to bring it to perfection as soon as new techniques became available' (94). Quite so.

This ability to provide an overview, and productively to juxtapose designs from different periods of Svoboda's creative output is a great benefit to the reader and is a mode of analysis that characterises Albertová's work. Comparisons are not only applied to different treatments of the same artistic source text, but also to experimentations with particular staging techniques (particularly projection and illumination) as well as to experiments with different materials: glass, steel, plastic, wood, paint and fabric. Albertová's confidence as a writer who is able to address these areas comes from several great strengths that are not easy to replicate: firstly, the fact that she was able to see a significant amount of her subject's output in the 1950s and 1960s (during a period before Svoboda's immense fame in theatrical circles had been achieved worldwide – and during an epoch of Czech history in which free access to domestic theatre venues was often impeded for western European and American academics and theatre practitioners as a result of travel restrictions associated with Communist rule). Equally, however, Albertová has a finely honed aesthetic understanding of the theatrical event itself, as a result of her ongoing work as a faculty member of the School for Applied Arts at Charles University in Prague and in her capacity as former director of the Czech Theatre Institute. Additionally, she has curated several international exhibitions of Svoboda's work and, crucially, had a personal friendship with the designer that led to frequent travels together (and thus many extended conversations with her subject regarding theatre in general and the

designer's role within it).

The opening chapters of the volume set the context into which Svoboda emerged as a creative practitioner, both personally (as a result of his father's pressures leading him to train as an apprentice joiner prior to his move into the professional theatre), and equally in terms of the artistic climate of 1940s Czechoslovakia: Socialist Realism. Whilst Albertová is keen to pay attention to the significance of this artistic school, prior to the death of Stalin in 1953, and to other important cultural factors, her analysis of Svoboda's designs of this early era (such as *The Crown Bride*, *Fragments from Empedocles* and *The Fox Trap*) show forcefully the designer's creative use of more Avant-garde left-leaning schools of art and theatrical representation (such as Constructivism and Expressionism). In the early designs, however, Albertová is keen to point to the differences between surviving artistic renderings and the actuality of realised settings. Her knowledge of the venues in which many of the early and mid-period works took place leads her not to shy away from pointing out in one particular instance that 'there is [...] no way the structure could have reached such an imposing height in the small concert hall' (the Smetana Museum) adding that 'the design is an expression of Svoboda's energy' (12). Designs in this section (largely artist's renderings rather than photographs, which appear in greater profusion later in the volume) show Svoboda working through radical ideas with a variety of classical and modern texts. They constitute an impressive account of an apprenticeship, although not formalised, as an experimental design student.

Albertová next deals with Svoboda's rapid rise as a professional designer, considering in detail his treatments of two major operas:

Otakar Ostrčil's *Kunála's Eyes* and Jacques Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*, the latter of which began the long-term collaboration between Svoboda and director Alfréd Radok. Here, the author draws attention to further experimentations with form and colour, and to Svoboda's fascination with Fauvist painting techniques. The section also contains an account of Svoboda's interest in the Modernist preoccupation with electricity, with Albertová stating of *Hoffmann*:

[I]n the background was the phosphorescent world of the technological future, symbolised by an iron construction with large electric isolators. A big transparent tube in which flashes crossed and which made a dominant vertical was the divide between the two worlds of Hoffmann's imagination [...] (19)

Other key designs are presented in a series of stunning colour plates (a major feature of this lavishly illustrated volume), with astute commentary including analysis of Verdi's *The Troubadour* (a rhythmic design with much owing to the work of Adolphe Appia) and Janáček's *Katya Kabanova*. For the latter production, Albertová draws attention to Svoboda's use of another great Modernist symbol: the tree (cf. Yeats and Beckett). Moving beyond Czech Structuralist semiotic analysis in her argument and, calling it 'a basic and eloquent sign: [...] a symbol of life and death, of freedom and imprisonment. A human retreat' (22). The author helpfully makes use, here and throughout the volume, of Svoboda's own recollections of his settings; his remembering, in this instance, of:

[T]he kind of apple tree I saw about me as a child in the country. At times their

branches almost crawled along the ground. Orchard keepers supported them with wooden poles, often anchoring their trunks in cement. (22)

Such combination of aesthetic and interpretative understanding, combined with an awareness of the experiential realities that led to many of Svoboda's designs is a great strength of Albertová's work. As the author knows, much of Svoboda's work was rooted in observations taken from real life, and his personal photographic archive of slides (tens of thousands of them) were organised thematically in series of: sunsets, trees, faces and so on. Other key designs dealt with capably in this formative section include: *Tosca*, *Rigoletto*, *Revisor*, *Fidelio* and *Don Giovanni*.

The mid-1950s are seen from a revisionist perspective as being a period: 'on the threshold of change' (35). Here, Albertová looks back (inevitably from the pivotal year of 1958) and considers the ways in which Radok's new position at the National Theatre allowed both he and Svoboda to reject the sometimes ostentatious display required by conventional opera in order to focus instead on the more stripped-down aesthetics of conventional drama. Attention is here paid to Svoboda's growing interest in creating striking proportional juxtapositions between scenic segments, and to his increasing shattering and fragmentation of the interior. Particularly attention (and visual analysis) is offered for *Today the Sun Still Sets above Atlantida*, *The Devil's Circle*, *The Golden Carriage*, *The Autumn Garden* and *The Entertainer*.

In the next section: 'The Important Year of 1958' (47-57) the author deals with the development of the *Laterna Magika* and

Polyecran technology (particularly for the Brussels *Expo 58*), but she also undertakes analysis of the significant *effects* that these technological developments brought to the wider theatre. The section begins with analysis of the National Theatre production of *A Sunday in August* (1958), in which Svoboda worked for the first time with large-format projection screens as a spatial element. Albertová works from Svoboda's assertion that it was:

[P]recisely this production which became the starting point for further productions in which I found things I had not known till that time [...] the first time we used these means and treated with projection surfaces as spatial elements. (47)

Her analysis of *A Sunday in August* is excellent, and is followed up with detailed discussion of Svoboda's collaboration with Radok for the *Nonstop Revue in 24 Scenes*, created for the international *Expo 58* in Brussels. Here, Albertová describes Svoboda's use of the production workshops at the National Theatre to prepare for a major international event, and outlines the institution's significance in the birthing process of the *Laterna Magika*. Other work at *Expo 58*, such as the *Polyecran* production *Prague Musical Spring* is also discussed in detail, prior to an extended section of analysis that discusses the effects that the *Laterna Magika* and *Polyecran* brought to the theatre. The author highlights the failure of these systems to create the new dramaturgy (which had been expected), but points to the utility of projection and multiple screen technologies in the scenographic development of Svoboda as a more conventional theatre designer, as well as to the influence that such systems

inevitably had over the wider visual arts (in the field of geometric abstraction and in a concomitant reinvigoration of the Modernist technique of collage). Analysis of Svoboda's theatrical experimentations with projection techniques is primarily undertaken using productions of *Prometheus*, *Their Day*, *The Lantern*, *Intolleranza 1960*, *The Tales of Hoffmann*, *The Opening of the Wells* and *The Last Ones*.

Following a brief section on Svoboda's development of a more sophisticated *Polyecran* system for *EXPO 67* in Montreal (and the scenographic developments it facilitated), attention turns to the use of projection techniques in two significant operatic settings of *The Soldiers* (1968 and 1976). These productions show Svoboda's more polished use of multiple projection screens, in combination with live action within proscenium settings. Subsequent sections on *Laterna Magika* productions conclude with an account of Svoboda's tenure as artistic director of (and then regular scenographic contributor to) the Prague-based *Laterna Magika Company* from 1974 until his death in 2002. Productions discussed range from *The Wonderful Circus* (1977) to *Graffiti* (2002) – although the latter production is discussed in greatest depth in the final chapter. Significant detail is provided for the landmark *Odysseus* (1987). In these sections, Albertová provides useful insights into Svoboda's use of non-diegetic music, camera techniques, and the integration of choreography with projected images. Attention is consistently paid to the increasing sophistication of techniques that came following the transfer from the Prague Palace of Culture to the *Nová scéna* (New Stage) adjacent to the National Theatre.

Separately from *Laterna Magika* productions, substantial space is given

in this section to discussion and analysis of the development at the same time of Svoboda's style in more conventional drama, particularly at the National Theatre. Numerous colour plates and production photographs of significant designs support Albertová's analysis of Svoboda's settings for the classics: *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Seagull*, *The Three Sisters*, *Ivanov*, *The Magic Flute*, *Don Giovanni* and *Oedipus Tyrannos*. It is in such productions that Albertová asserts Svoboda developed his unique style. Designs are accordingly analysed in detail with a view to charting the formulation of a characteristic visual aesthetic. This accomplishment, Albertová asserts, was achieved largely as a result of the designer's on-going working relationships with one particular set of craftspeople, workshops and stages. Svoboda's increasing fascination with mirrored surfaces is also considered in these sections, particularly in an account of *The Magic Flute*, as well as his mastery of monumental architectonic structures and the juxtaposition of vertical and horizontal playing spaces (in *Oedipus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*). Albertová's analysis is astute throughout.

Another great advantage of the monograph is the attention paid to less well-known pieces, such as *The Insect Play*, in which Svoboda used two gigantic irregularly quadrilateral mirrors, leaning towards each other and the auditorium above a revolve. The form of these mirrors was one of hexagonal cells (derived from honeycomb), with each set of mirrors at a slightly different angle, reflecting a colourful carpet on the revolve. The aliatory effect of these mirrors' multiple reflections created an abstract collage of bits of actors, furniture and props in what Albertová calls: 'an ever changing round dance through the movement

of the revolve and lighting changes' (120). The structure (made from Plexiglas and plywood) arose from the dramaturgy of the play, but allowed for experimentation that could be bold and would allow Svoboda to increase an armoury of techniques that could subsequently be used in other productions. Other less well-known designs dealt with (in quite some detail) include Dürrenmatt's *Anabaptists*, which provides further insight into the designer's increasing technical sophistication. Here Albertová observes:

[A] giant stage object had the shape of a transparent globe whose latitudes and longitudes were created by ribs [...] the meridians were circling balconies and made it possible for the action to be set into the whole height of the stage. The equatorial ribs, only indicated at the front, evoked an impression of giant spiders' tentacles. (126)

The design apparently so impressed Dürrenmatt at the premiere that he said he had never seen a set that so surpassed his expectations of the staging possibilities of his plays. Fine praise indeed, even if it is seldom reported upon. We are to thank Albertová for pointing out such facts to us.

Once Svoboda's growing technical virtuosity is shown as having matured into a style that matched his ever-astute artistic vision, the book turns to its third major section: 'Opera and Ballet on the Great Stages of the World' (137-149). Here Albertová considers productions such as *Pelléas et Mellisande* at the Opera House, Covent Garden; *Carmen* for the *Theater der Freien Hansestadt*, Bremen (and the Metropolitan Opera, New York); *The Sicilian Vespers* at the *Hamburgische Staatsoper*; *The Magic*

Flute for the *Bayerische Staatsoper*, Munich, and *The Trojans* for the *Grand Théâtre*, Geneva. These operatic productions all display elements of Svoboda's distinguished architectonic style, with increasingly ambitious and highly adaptable monumental scenery. Next, the author turns her attention to the designer's on-going relationship to Wagner. This section acknowledges the scholarship of Jarka M. Burian, and outlines the development of Svoboda's Wagnerian treatments (from his 1967 *Tristan and Isolde* to his magnificent *Ring Cycle* set inside the Imperial Roman architecture of *Théâtre Antique*, Orange, in 1988). This section of the book contains some of the most beautiful pictures of modern scenography that can be seen, in particular, settings for *Tristan and Isolde* and the *Ring Cycle*. Accounts are given throughout of technical problems and their solutions, including fascinating nuggets like the invention of a method of making mist haze stay around on stage for longer periods of time (by charging the water droplets with a small positive electrical force) so that Svoboda's specially developed lighting techniques could be seen to full effect.

Throughout most of the 1970s, Svoboda was working simultaneously on at least two Wagnerian opera productions, and Albertová brings fresh insight to the ways in which creative juxtapositions brought benefit to his work. The use of hidden reverse mirrors, or the introduction of a programmed score of lighting and projection changes (when for the first time one man directed a whole team of lighting operators and projectionists) are set within a narrative that describes a relentless creative output. Following the section on Wagner, there are briefer accounts of less monumental operatic productions in the 1980s and 1990s; these include works by

Strauss, Tchaikovsky, Smetana, Verdi and Mozart – all of which took place at a variety of major world venues. The final benefit in the operatic section comes in the chapter footnotes, which include thirteen different technical drawings and design sketches for particularly important effects deployed in the productions discussed. Here, as elsewhere, Albertová provides the theatre professional (and academic) with a highly valuable resource for discussing, understanding and teaching the ingenious solutions to technical problems for which Svoboda was renowned.

The concluding sections of the book deal with new collaborations; concluding works at the *Laterna Magika*; and unfulfilled dreams. These chapters largely chart out the creative collaborations that a highly articulate and very open-handed practitioner had, in the last years of his life, with a younger generation of theatre makers throughout the world. With younger collaborators such as Armand Delcampe, Svoboda was able to develop and play with effects such as 'pseudo-plastic projection' (*The Exchange*) or 'absolute psycho-plastic space' (*Break of Noon*). Other Delcampe/Svoboda collaborations are capably assessed (*The Pelican*, *The Seagull*), as well as Svoboda's later work with the Italian director Giorgio Strehler and with Walter Tillemans in Belgium. These late productions are cast in the light of ludic experimentation, with Albertová asserting, for example, that 'working in [a] small and atypical space in Belgium awakened the playfulness and imagination of Svoboda's early days' (204). The book concludes with fresh insight into three un-built theatre projects: the *Théâtre d'Est* (Paris) and two un-built designs for the *Laterna Magika* and *Nová scéna* (Prague). The author reproduces in each instance both architectural drawings

and models for the projects, alongside a commentary of Svoboda's intentions and motivations relating to each example.

Taken individually, any one of the five sections of Albertová's volume would constitute a welcome addition to the extant bibliography dealing with a man who was probably the greatest theatre designer to have practised in the twentieth century; taken as a whole, the book is one of the most valuable resources to have been added to the field of

Theatre Studies in the last decade. The author is to be congratulated on an immaculately presented volume that provides not only a clear narrative throughline and detailed explication of the career of a truly great designer, but also a great analytical and visual catalogue of his production activity. *Josef Svoboda: Scenographer* is a welcome addition to all serious Theatre-Studies libraries worldwide.



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