WOLFGANG ROTH AND THE PROBLEMS

OF A CONTEMPORARY SCENE DESIGNER

BY

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WOLFGANG ROTH: A CHRONOLOGY

GERMANY, 1927-1933

Legitimate theatre, opera, operetta.
Cabaret, film.

AUSTRIA, 1933-1934

Vienna legitimate theatre, cabaret.
Interior and exterior architecture.

SWITZERLAND, 1934-1938

Legitimate theatre, opera, operetta.
Musical, vaudeville, circus.

INTERNATIONAL

1937 Salzburg Opera Guild, touring Europe and America.

1948 Toronto, Canada: opera.

1951 Berlin, Germany: International Theatre Festival.
(Medea, Guthrie McClintic production)

1952 Vienna, Austria.
(The Old Maid and the Thief, Menotti)
(Porgy and Bess, Breen production)

1952/6 Porgy and Bess (R. Breen production), international tour.

1953 Berlin, Germany: School for Wives (Molière).

1955 Paris, France: International Festival du Théâtre.
(Medea, Guthrie McClintic production)

USA, SINCE 1938

Broadway and Off-Broadway legitimate and opera.
Summer stock, musical, ballet, opera, architecture.

Porgy and Bess (Davis-Breen production)
Twentieth Century (J. Ferrer production)
Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep (Hume Cronyn production)
Androcles and the Lion (M. Webster production)
Yellow Jack (Martin Ritt production)
The First Million (J. Elliott production)
Bernadine (Guthrie McClintic production)
Tower Beyond Tragedy (J. Anderson production)
The Deadly Game (J. Manchester production)

ANTA Play Series:
Technical director and supervisory designer.
(Louis Jouvet Co. and others)

ANTA Experimental Theatre:
The Wanhope Building
Cock-a-Doodle-Doo
Here Comes the Clown

Margaret Webster Touring Shakespeare Co.:
Hamlet
Macbeth

Boston Repertory Theatre:
Road to Rome
Heartbreak House
Knickerbocker Holiday and others

S. Hurok Co.:
Supervisory and lighting designer.
(Jean-Louis Barrault Co.)
(Kabuki Dancers)
(Sadlers Wells Ballet)
(Comédie Française)

Metropolitan Opera, New York:
Don Pasquale
Boris Godounov
Tristan and Isolde
Nabucco
Masked Ball

New York City Center Opera:
School for Wives

Off-Broadway:
Johnny Johnson (Stella Adler production)
The Riverline (Stuart Vaughn production)
The Good Woman of Setzuan (Phoenix Theatre)
The Secret Concubine
The Littlest Circus (own management, production and design: nationally touring, including Broadway)

Bloomington, Indiana:
Opera designs.

Cincinnati Summer Opera Co., Ohio:
Designer and art director.

Boston, Massachusetts:
Boston Opera Group (1960/1).
(Opera designs)

A BACKGROUND AGAINST WHICH TO WORK

In constructing a historical or philosophical background or tradition against which a contemporary scenic designer works, we will undoubtedly have to turn to the movement which occurred at the turn of the last century, known as "the new stagecraft." This all-inclusive title has been given to several methods of production which revolted against the precepts of photographic realism or naturalism which dominated theatrical production of the era. This revolution came about from a multiplicity of causes, but principally from the revolution in art and literature that took place in the middle of the nineteenth century. As playwrights like Ibsen and Strindberg set out to explore with new incisiveness and to expose with new directness and vigor the nature of human relationships, the designer became aware of the value of a simple setting and of symbols to bring out underlying psychological implications.[1]

It is difficult to say where one movement leaves off and another one starts. If we were to start at the beginning, we would probably have to go back to Germany in 1866 when George, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, assumed the direction of the Meiningen Players. He paid much attention to the architectural quality of his sets, made extensive use of stage levels on which his action was to be mounted and took special care to see that each of his actors was perfectly placed.[2] Certainly the contributions of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen are significant and constitute the beginnings of modern stagecraft and of the principle that actors play within a setting rather than in front of painted slides or shutters which were typical of an earlier concept of stage scenery. But as the Saxe-Meiningen reforms took root, they developed by the end of the nineteenth century into a form of literal accuracy or photographic realism which reached incredible extremes. It is against these extremes that the new stagecraft revolted and attempted to replace literalism with suggestion. Yet it must be remembered that the naturalistic or photographic realism approach to stage scenery does not negate this general principle of playing within a set rather than against it; therefore, the revolution of the new stagecraft was not so much a revolt against this general principle as it was against the extremes in literalism which, it was felt, allowed for no stimulation of the imagination.

David Belasco in America and Otto Brahm in Europe are the outstanding examples of producers who led the movement to set their plays within a literally accurate setting. This movement did not stop with a reasonable accuracy but was carried to almost absurd

extremes. Sheldon Cheney says, in his discussion of this movement:

> They developed a philosophy of "the importance of the little things," and in an attempt to portray actual rooms with absolute photographic perfection, they brought into the setting a profusion of casual objects. They thought that by assembling enough correct little things, they could achieve truth. The actor who before had played in settings negligently and tawdrily built with whatever the scene painter and property man found easiest to bring in, or in scenes gorgeously built up with mountains of unrelated magnificence, now found himself in a scene aglitter with naturalistic detail, self-consciously proclaiming itself a real room by virtue of its ability to exhibit real books in real bookcases, real hat-racks with real hats on them, real phonographs and newspapers and telephones, and a hundred added real incidentals as observed by the producer in lived-in rooms.[3]

Mordecai Gorelik, writing in 1948, described the naturalistic movement as follows:

> Some fifty years ago a new conception of theatre, cradled in the rationalism of the French Encyclopedists and grown to maturity in a scientific age, was ready to insist that life itself be brought to the stage. And so the Naturalistic stage form was integrated, under the brilliant tutelage of men like Ibsen, Strindberg, Zola, Antoine, Brahm, Hauptmann, Chekhov and Stanislavsky.[4]

This, then, was the essential philosophy of the naturalists, which led to such fantastic extremes as Belasco's famous pancake-frying in a set which was the exact duplication of Childs' Restaurant. This was the philosophy against which the new stagecraft revolted. Continuing his discussion of the Naturalists, Gorelik adds:

> The Naturalists did not succeed entirely in their aim. A second generation of theatre workers pointed out shortcomings in the Naturalistic practice, rebelled against Naturalistic dogma. People like Appia, Craig, Erler, Fort, Reinhardt, Yeats, Maeterlinck, led their rebellion. Once considered incompetent dreamers, these insurgents finally inherited the theatre. They brought back lyricism to a drama which had lost the power to take wing. They replaced with a poetic stage form another form which had grown hopelessly prosaic. Serene

> in the strength of its imagination the new theater created a vision of beauty toward which it invited men to build in peace.[5]

It is significant that Gorelik places Appia and Craig at the head of his list of revolutionaries, for indeed it is to these two men we must turn to see the beginnings of the movement. It is almost an impossible task to compound the philosophy of men like Appia or Craig into a single paragraph, but Sheldon Cheney, writing of Appia in 1928, summarizes as follows:

> In the first place Appia went back to that foundation principle -- revolutionary in 1899 -- that there must be unity of play, scene and action. The current scene, he noted, made such unity impossible. The setting was made up of inanimate objects and materials; and the two-dimensioned art of the painter, in a tortured form, was wrongly introduced into what should be a place of three-dimensioned space and light. The scene was dead while the actor was living.
>
> . . . Determining that the painter should therefore no longer determine the conditions of the mise-en-scène, that a mode of setting should be developed that would emphasize the actor above all, that the surroundings must be "living" and three-dimensional, Appia turned to light as a medium. The current setting was lighted practically flat, like a picture. But Appia foresaw that the elements necessary to the background could be subordinated, and living light be made to fill the stage, or a living play of light and shadow. . . . Later, Appia in his experiments and new series of drawings abandoned entirely what he had taken from the old stage picture, and experimented with architectural masses and steps until he developed a new sort of formal stage. The actor's presence remained his one starting point, but he found a new importance in movement and space. The later phase of his work only within a very few years has come to the attention of the world; and important as it is proving to be, "light" is the word by which his service to the modern theatre is likely to be perpetually recognized. The scene made to live in light, light as a binding force, dramatic light, dynamic light, light the perfect slave, unifying, clarifying, emotionalizing, light deified.[6]

The word "unity" is primary to Appia's philosophy. The word

"light" is primary to his technical approach. The actor is the focus of his attention.

Gordon Craig echoes Appia's words concerning unity. Cheney describes Craig's approach by saying, ". . . the art of the theatre, beyond having that unity which is an attribute of all art, and utilizing to the full the values of that action which is its own essential feature, will abandon the ideal of an illusion of reality, the ideal of faithful if selective representation of something happening naturally; will instead present a show that is typically and recognizably theatrical."[7]

This new movement was concerned, then, with taking the emphasis away from accurate pictorial presentation and letting the idea of the author or playwright pervade the whole stage, so that the actor becomes the central figure in the communication of their ideas.

These ideas -- this philosophy -- took root in Germany at the turn of the century and there found its first adherents. The dramatic revolution took on other forms in other parts of Europe. Starting at the beginning of this century, the Austrian Max Reinhardt turned the techniques of Appia and Craig toward the building of huge dramatic spectacles, intended to draw the attention of the masses and to popularize the new stagecraft. Also in France the new movement was making itself felt through such leading dramatic artists as Jacques Copeau and Louis Jouvet. Here the French rationalism and delicacy of taste brought about a new simplicity and intimacy of staging.[8]

It was evident that designers were going to go beyond the creation of new effects in old style theatres and demand a new

approach to the architecture of theatres themselves. Copeau and Reinhardt both contributed new designs for theatre architecture and so did the Russian director Vsevold Meyerhold, who, as early as 1906, attempted to eliminate from his grandiose productions the curtain, the proscenium arch, and a whole set of conventions that preceded him.[9] Perhaps, as is true in most revolutions, the revolutionaries are guilty of as many extremes as are the original "villains."

Thus did a new theatre movement start -- for it did go beyond the area of stage design -- and this movement was to create in America, beginning in 1915, the ground work of contemporary scenic design.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

The revolution occurring in the European theatre was bound to make its influences felt in America. Much interest was expressed as these ideas were introduced to this country, but no native designer had yet come forth as a disciple of the new stagecraft. Irwin Pichel, in a letter to Samuel Marks, writes as follows concerning this:

> Our first knowledge of what was being done in Europe had come to us largely through George Pierce Baker on his return, in the fall of 1912, from a trip abroad, loaded with photographs and lantern slides and on fire with enthusiasm. That same fall, Sam Hume had come to Harvard from his period of work with Gordon Craig. And Robert Edmond Jones was a young instructor who had not yet been abroad and had not yet designed *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife* for Granville Barker's New York season (Spring, 1915).[10]

Sheldon Cheney also describes the introduction of the new stagecraft to America:

> The conjunction of forces that brought about a

> very flowering of pretty stagecraft between 1915 and 1920 was due to the meeting of several impulses from Europe. Within a year of two of the earlier date, America saw the Viennese Joseph Urban introduce simplified and extraordinarily decorative mounting to the opera in Boston . . . saw Robert Edmond Jones return to America from study with Reinhardt, saw Sam Hume return after working in Gordon Craig's studio-school in Italy.[11]

It is difficult and even unfair to point to one particular incident as having introduced these new concepts to this country, for several forces were at work which would eventually be significant in the transformation of American scene design. This, however, should not minimize the effect of Joseph Urban's work with the Boston Opera Company nor the significance of Robert Edmond Jones' designs for the 1915 production of _The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife._

> The first organizations to adopt the theory in this country were the non-professional art theatres, the Washington Square Players, Provincetown Players, The Toy Theater of Boston, and The Little Theatre of Chicago. Theatre critics have honored the artists who designed the settings for these groups, crediting them with establishing the new stagecraft in America, but the facts are otherwise. No designer for art theatres, except Lee Simonson, significantly influenced the American theatre, and Simonson did so only after he began to work for the professional Theatre Guild.[12]

The above quotation tends to dispel any idea that the art theatres were the organizations that established the new order in this country. Mr. Larsen goes on to state that "It was Robert Edmond Jones who, with his designs for _The Man Who Married A Dumb Wife_ (1915), _The Devil's Garden_ (1915), _Redemption_ (1918), _The Jest_ (1919), and _Richard III_ (1920), did the most toward founding the new stagecraft in America."[13]

Indeed, the name of Robert Edmond Jones has almost become

synonymous with the beginnings of the new stagecraft in America. Although Mr. Jones was unusually adept as a craftsman as well as an artist of stage decoration -- his ground plans were prepared with the greatest of care and display an accurate knowledge of stagecraft and construction -- he is often thought of as a theorist like Appia or Craig, in that he wrote most eloquently about his craft. Here again it is difficult to reduce his philosophy to a single paragraph, for he deals with all the many varied subjects of the theatre. Norris Houghton, writing in Theatre Arts Monthly in 1936, tells of his own difficulties in trying to arrive at Jones' theory. He states:

> It is difficult to write an account of an interview with Robert Edmond Jones; it is difficult in the first place to conduct the interview at all. For Jones is an artist, a poet, a visionary, and, as you sit watching him pace the room as he conjures forth visions, you are magnetized by a kind of electrical discharge which he emanates; yet when you attempt in later tranquillity to put those ideas into common prose, to set down the glowing image that he has somehow seemed to snatch from the air about him, the result is stale, flat, and unprofitable. And when you try through conning your notes, to decide what his answers to a specific question were you find he has made no answers.[14]

Once again, perhaps the word "unity" is the key to Jones' philosophy. He saw a theatre where a production was the final result of an almost perfect meeting of minds among playwright, producer, director, designer, performers, and everyone down to the various stage hands involved in shifting scenery. The exact role that the scenery should play in this idyllic arrangement was described by Jones in 1917 when he wrote:

> While the scenery of a play is important it should be so important that the audience should forget that it is painted. There should be a fusion between the play and its scenery. Scenery isn't there to be looked at, it is really there to be forgotten. The drama is the fire, the scenery is the air that lifts the fire and makes it bright. If a scene is properly done it should unconsciously "get" the audience. The audience that is always conscious of the backdrop is paying a doubtful compliment to the painter. It may not be that the scene is bad -- the set that they are looking at may be very fine -- but it may not fit the particular action of the play.[15]

Jones, like Appia and Craig before him, echoes the idea that the focus of a play is on the performer:

> A stage setting has no independent life of its own. Its emphasis is directed toward the performance. In the absence of the actor it does not exist. . . . How often in critics' reviews one comes upon the phrase, "The settings were gorgeous." Such a statement, of course, can mean only one thing, that no one concerned with producing the drama has thought of it as an organic whole.[16]

Jones has made several brief statements as to what the definition of a set is. He has said that a setting is not a background, but an environment.[17] He has said that a good scene should not be a picture, but an image.[18] Concerning stage lighting Jones has stated that "lighting a scene consists not merely in throwing light upon objects but in throwing light upon a subject."[19] Norris Houghton has probably summed up all of these definitions in stating that "Jones' first desire as he designs is to 'carry the audience into that other region where the ideal play takes place.' Hence, to 'find the simplest, broadest, boldest, grandest way to take the audience there and to keep them there' is at the same time his principal preoccupation and his point of departure."[20]

The actual means by which Jones was to achieve these effects are difficult to decipher and are perhaps best explained by Kenneth MacGowan, when he writes:

> For a positive faith the new stagecraft put imagination before everything. There was simplicity. The stage was not to be cluttered with meaningless detail. Every "property" was to have its own use, each stretch of wall to express the one thing for which it stood. The results were stronger, sincerer, more direct, and so, more beautiful. Then there was suggestion. It crept out of simplicity. A touch or two of Eastern decoration on a flat wall summoned more of the Orient than acres of carved filigree. A third quality gave aid from the other arts, impression -- atmosphere of reality, not reality itself; the impression of things, not crude, literal representations.[21]

This seems to be the keynote of Jones' approach and, indeed, the keynote for defining the role of scene design in the new stagecraft.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

The name Norman Bel Geddes stands alongside of Robert Edmond Jones and Lee Simonson to form a great triumvirate as first-generation scene designers of the new school. Bel Geddes, unlike Simonson and Jones, never wrote on scene design, but through Norris Houghton's interviews we can get the essence of his ideas and notice the similarity to the ideas of Jones and Simonson. Bel Geddes, perhaps more than the other two, emphasized the directorial role of the designer and he often acted in both capacities. For Bel Geddes, it was the designer who determined the physical action and movement of a play. Houghton says this concerning Bel Geddes:

> To Norman Bel Geddes the art of design and the

> art of direction are inextricably part of one scenic pattern. When he talks of design, it is in terms of movement of actors in three-dimensional space, the ideas contained in their speech, and light; when he speaks of direction, it is in terms of these same things. An examination of his methods of work shows how natural it is for him to be both designer and director, how necessary for him to have one foot on each bank.[22]

An examination of a page from Bel Geddes' rehearsal book, which Houghton has reproduced,[23] is most enlightening. By every speech there are extensive remarks concerning mood, action, reaction, lighting notations and character motivations.

Bel Geddes, firmly believing in the "organic outgrowth of the action of a play,"[24] approached his scripts in rather a unique way. The first thing he did was to erase any notations regarding movement or setting that the playwright might have included. He then felt he was free to let his imagination create the movement and the whole setting as he read over the script. This had some startling results. Mr. Houghton describes one such incident:

> In Dead End, for instance, because he never read Sidney Kingsley's original stage directions, Bel Geddes did not know that the author had called for a setting which would look down the dead-end street toward the river instead of up the street away from the waterfront. If he had studied these directions, then as he read the play, he would unconsciously have tried to fit it to this structure. But since he did not, he was free to build up a picture based on the action and dialogue of the play itself, a picture wherein the activity of the pier's end became the focal point and rightly so, a setting just the reverse of the one the author had described in his manuscript, but not out of keeping with what the author had visualized in his manuscript.[25]

Bel Geddes, it seems, more than any other designer of this era, held within his scope the points of view of all the various theatre

arts and very nearly approaches the position of "regisseur."

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

If Norman Bel Geddes possessed the qualities of both director and designer, it is Lee Simonson who possesses the unique qualities of unparalleled craftsmanship with outstanding artistry. In addition to these two admirable qualities he seems to have a perspective which, while it seems apparent and obvious, is of great importance and most essential significance when describing the present-day developments of the new stagecraft. Let us look into the "perspective" of Simonson. Essentially it seems to involve the ideas of time and place. The modes of contemporary life, the attitudes of contemporary audiences, the prevailing socio-economic philosophies of the day, etc., all these will determine the approach a designer will take. While Simonson adheres to the principles of organic growth and unity that Bel Geddes and Jones propounded, he adds the fact that the direction this growth or this unity takes is not an absolute thing in a script and may vary from one production to another.

For Simonson the role of the scene designer is to make significant and meaningful to an audience those parts of a script which may be somewhat obscure. Plays that have "themes that are universally accepted are rarely staged with any distinction of style because they have no need to be."[26]

Simonson at times almost seems to be in revolt against the importance placed upon the scene designers by critics and practitioners during the twenties for he rather boldly states that "the scenic

designer must reconcile himself to the fact that the aesthetic values of his stage settings are relative and no more important than the production for which they are designed."[27] Thus he can state that "any setting I have designed might have been done equally well, if not better, in an entirely different manner."[28] Simonson uses his own settings for Liliom as an example. He designed his sets with a considerable amount of literal accuracy for he felt that an American audience needed this literal accuracy to assist their imaginations in creating the various scenes of this foreign locale. A production of Liliom in its own country would not need nearly the amount of attention to detail that his production did. If we are to adhere to Simonson's approach it seems quite illogical to make any formulas or rules concerning what any particular scene should be or how we should achieve any particular aesthetic effect.

Given the particular time and place in which to create a setting, Simonson says, "my first step in designing almost any production is to find a solution to its technical problems."[29] Thus in a play like Call It A Day his first consideration in designing was to invent a series of setting which could be rapidly shifted. The use of the word "invent" is intentional. Simonson used the word himself in order to point up the pure mechanical and technical know-how that a designer must utilize in order to bring a setting to actuality. He saw his final product as an invention for the solution of problems rather than any sort of "metaphor" or image containing or representing the philosophical content of a play.

In a production like Idiot's Delight we can see an illustration

of Simonson's emphatic statement that "the design of a setting depends upon the acting that fills it."[30] This requires a close coordination between designer, director and actor. The very capabilities of an actor to fill space or the degree of talent of a particular actor becomes one of the considerations a designer must consider when creating his scene. Thus we see that Simonson's ability to reduce broad, sweeping theories into practical details uncovers many very real and practical items that a scene designer must consider.

Simonson's proclamation that the aesthetic values of stage settings are relative and his "inventing" of settings that take care of technical problems within a play seem to suggest that he felt that a production, rather than simply being performance-controlled, should also be audience-focussed.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

These three men -- Jones, Bel Geddes, and Simonson -- form the first generation of American scene designers who took their impetus from the European revolution and set down the principles by which much present-day scenic designing is determined. Second, third and fourth-generation designers have continued to follow the same general approach. Of course we are able to find instances in which designers have taken quite the opposite approach, but if we consider Simonson's statement concerning the relativity of scenic aesthetics, we must hold all approaches valid as long as they are suitable. The works of these three men, then, form the background against which a contemporary American scene designer must place himself.

NOTES

1. Pamphlet, "The American Stage," Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington, D. C.), p. 3.

2. _Ibid._

3. Sheldon Cheney, _Stage Decoration_, Chapman and Hall, Ltd. (London, 1928), p. 136.

4. Mordecai Gorelik, _New Theatres for Old_, Samuel French (New York, 1948), p. 472.

5. _Ibid._

6. Cheney, p. 77.

7. _Ibid._

8. Pamphlet, "The American Stage," p. 4.

9. _Ibid._

10. Samuel Marks, _Settings by Joseph Urban. An Evaluation of His Stagecraft_, University of Wisconsin Library MS Theses (1955), p. 73.

11. Cheney, pp. 94-95.

12. Orville K. Larsen, _Scene Design for Stage and Screen_, Michigan State University Press (East Lansing, 1961), ix.

13. _Ibid._, x.

14. Norris Houghton, "The Designer Sets the Stage," _Theatre Arts Monthly_, Vol. 20 (December, 1936), p. 966.

15. Robert Edmond Jones, "The Future Decorative Art of the Theatre," _Theatre Magazine_, Vol. 22 (May, 1917), p. 266.

16. Robert Edmond Jones, _The Dramatic Imagination_, Duell, Sloan, and Pearce (New York, 1941), pp. 69-70.

17. _Ibid._, p. 23.

18. _Ibid._, p. 24.

19. _Ibid._, p. 130.

20. Houghton, p. 966.

21. Kenneth MacGowan, "The New Stagecraft in America," Century Magazine, Vol. 87 (January, 1914), p. 418.

22. Houghton, p. 766.

23. Ibid., pp. 782-783.

24. Ibid., p. 781.

25. Ibid., pp. 784-785.

26. Lee Simonson, The Stage Is Set, Harcourt, Brace and Co. (New York, 1932), p. 96.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Houghton, p. 879.

30. Ibid.

A SYSTEM IN WHICH TO WORK

In the preceding section I referred to the advent of the new stagecraft as a revolution. In one sense this description is accurate, for the movement did tend to sweep away the old forms and replace them completely. In Europe, especially, the ideas of Appia and Craig caught hold and dominated the theatres of the various countries, through the work of such men as Copeau, Reinhardt and Meyerhold. In America, however, the ideas of the new stagecraft, while they created a great deal of interest and excitement among theatre scholars and practitioners, never fully dominated the professional theatre. The small theatres tended to utilize the new ideas almost immediately, but one tends to wonder what their motives were -- artistic or financial; for it was often the case that the techniques of the new stagecraft were employed only because they may have proved to be less expensive. Writing of such productions, Robert Edmond Jones says:

> When I go to the theater, I want to get an eyeful. Why not? I do not want to have to look at one of those so-called "suggestive" settings, in which a single Gothic column is made to do duty for a cathedral; it makes me feel as if I had been invited to some important ceremony and had been given a poor seat behind a post. I do not want to see any more "skeleton stages" in which a few architectural elements are combined and re-combined for the various scenes of a play, for after the first half hour I invariably discover that I have lost the thread of the drama. In spite of myself, I have become fascinated wondering whether the castle door I have seen in the first act is going to turn into a refectory table in the second act or a hope-chest in the last act. No, I don't like these clever, falsely economical contraptions. And I do not want to look at a setting that tells me that it is the latest fashion, as though its designer had taken a flying trip like a spring buyer and brought back a trunk full of the latest styles of scenery.
>
> I want my imagination to be stimulated by what I see on the stage. But the moment I get a sense of effort, my imagination is not stimulated, it is starved. That play is finished as far as I'm concerned. For I have come to the theater to see a play, not to see the work done on a play.[1]

Sheldon Cheney, when reviewing the use of the new stagecraft in American theatres, felt that the principles of Appia and Craig were not being fulfilled. He said:

> The New York shows were being dressed up in the loveliest of clothes, whether they deserved them or not, and the little theatres were staging their endless productions with a finish, a daring and a physical appeal that ten years earlier would have seemed magic. The thoroughness with which the commercial theatre was won over to the simplified stagecraft -- though without fundamental change in type of play or stage -- was in itself an indication that the artists concerned were compromising the principles they took from Craig, were setting aside the deeper vision several of them had seen of an entirely different theatre.[2]

Cheney, while he makes this observation, never points to reasons for this "half-use" of the new stagecraft. Perhaps an article in Touchstone Magazine correctly analyzes the reasons when it states:

"The commercial theaters have not done too much in fostering this new movement because of the business nature of the venture."[3]

It seems that the very nature of commercial theatre is rather conservative and it is often hesitant to try new things because of the financial risks involved. In 1915, when Robert Edmond Jones did his sets for The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife, David Belasco was still a big and successful producer and audiences were still paying to see his style of production. Indeed, Belasco continued to do his naturalistic productions as late as 1922. Even a man like Joseph Urban, who was significant in introducing the European methods to this country through his work at the Boston Opera Company, by 1919 had formed a partnership with Florenz Ziegfeld and had deserted the "work of a poet" referred to by Robert Edmond Jones[4] for the leg and scenery extravaganzas of the Follies. When asked about his work for these extravagant scenic productions, Mr. Urban made a reply that would lead one to think that the new stagecraft had undergone quite a few changes during its trip across the Atlantic. Charles Meltzer writes of Urban's statements:

> Mr. Urban, who is frank and honest, admitted lately, when I talked with him, that, before all, he sees his art "pictorially." He seeks to charm, to please, to fascinate, by poetizing what he has to show us. To him the meanings and moods of plays are less important than his own designs. They may or may not harmonize with his. Some do. Some -- don't. And if they fail to do so, why, tant pis. His pictures seem the ends and not the means.[5]

In spite of all the "heavy books on the Art of Scene Design which were compiled during the twenties"[6] our contemporary theatre designer is without any real or abiding philosophy. This statement

is not a condemnation, but only an actualization of Lee Simonson's statements concerning the influences of time and place upon the work of a designer. Nor does this statement belittle the work of men like Appia, Craig and Jones, for their work is of unquestionable influence upon today's designers. But in view of the many and diverse forms contemporary scene design takes, the work of these men must eventually be termed an influence which is of lasting significance rather than a philosophy which determines the approach of designers to follow. Indeed, if we were to accept the reforms made in the 1920's as a final philosophy, we would be placing the art of scene design in a rut which could easily lead to extremes and end in the same static position from which the new stagecraft was supposed to have rescued us. But if we accept the idea of the relativity of the aesthetics of design we can study the work of Appia, Craig and Jones, taking from them that which will be meaningful to a present-day audience, yet not disregarding the work of men like Belasco, whose influence is still with us. It is interesting that our two most famous examples of stage naturalism or pictorial realism came to us after the reforms of the new stagecraft and were designed by leaders of the new movement. I refer to Norman Bel Geddes' set for Signey Kingsley's Dead End and Jo Mielziner's setting for Elmer Rice's Street Scene. These two settings utilize all the extremes of stage realism and would be the envy of any Belasco disciple. Even more recently we can see the remaining influence of the Belasco tradition when we read critics who are highly impressed and awestruck by the fact that it rains

all over the stage at the end of the first act of Tennessee Williams' latest play.

Thus a contemporary scene designer has almost all approaches open to him. Contemporary audiences have been exposed to and will accept almost any approach from the extremely realistic to the bare back wall of Our Town. The fact that he has no rigid or formal style to follow makes a designer's work more difficult. If we were still in the days of painted perspective, a designer's problems would be solved as long as he could paint well. If we were in the vogue of Belasco's realism a designer's problems would be solved, if he could locate enough real items. But a designer of today must determine first of all what his approach is to be, what is suitable to the script, what meets with the director's approval, and above all what the producer plans for the show -- for in contemporary theatre the role of the producer is becoming more dominant, emphasizing the increasing importance of the financial aspects of theatre. Indeed, the financial considerations determine what a designer will do nearly as much as do artistic considerations.

One of the primary reasons for the difference between the American and the European use of the new stagecraft goes back to the fact that American and European theatres are not operated the same way. European theatres -- the theatres of Copeau, Reinhardt and Meyerhold -- were state-supported theatres that didn't run any financial risk and therefore could afford to experiment with new ideas. American professional theatre, on the other hand, depends upon the box office for its survival. Unless there is a paying

audience, it does not exist. This is by no means a condemnation of one system or praise for the other. The fact that the American theatre operates out of a box office is one of the "variable" factors Lee Simonson considers when he writes of the relativity of the aesthetics of design. While box-office matters can hardly be called aesthetic, they do influence what approach a designer will take. If the beautiful and aesthetically perfect sketches of a designer are too expensive to become a reality, they are out of place in the commercial system. What the cost will be is just as important a consideration for a designer as the size of the stage on which he is working.

The financial aspects of today's theatre are perhaps even more influential than they were fifty years ago, when the new stagecraft came into vogue. Since then we have seen many trends come and go, but through them all the financial consideration has remained. Howard Bay gives this brief analysis of contemporary theatre:

> In the twenties minds of young designers were twisted and warped with Expressionism, Constructivism, Illusionism and other restrictive terms. . . .
>
> By the thirties we had developed one commercial style. That of a few tactful objects spaced against a fuzzy type water color. It was labeled "selective realism." It still is. It isn't a trend anymore, it is just a fact of life.
>
> The depression years gave us the Living Newspapers with the "lyrical hyperrealism" of their designs which matched the plays for which they were created -- sharp, angular, striking, and depressing. This vogue passed and we returned to a more pictorial concentration. The sharp edge of design was softened and rounded off and designers returned to the genre that began in the twenties with Lee Simonson's designs for <u>Goat Song</u>.
>
> Trends come and go. Today we find normal interiors -- an attempt by designers to wring out the

> maximum mood of the play from an accumulation of a few painted flats, furniture, drops and an assortment of right knickknacks. This is one of the better sort of trends and not the dominant one. The dominant one is bad and is related to a queer and and twisted kind of economics. It has nothing to do with anything except somebody's determination to have an overdressed stage and to hell with the play![7]

Mr. Bay goes on to pinpoint the source of these "queer and twisted economics" to the present-day type of producer who, instead of attempting to cut costs, spends huge sums on meaningless detail: "The old type producing manager knew show business and his knowledge was carefully brought to bear on every item of production. The new type of producer is actually a financier and promoter -- giving kickbacks and lining nests which have no connection with theater. If the script is weak, pay some stars and trim up the scenery."[8]

The effect that a producer-promoter of this type has upon the work of a designer is dramatically illustrated by a story told by Jo Mielziner.[9] Early in his career before he achieved his widespread fame, Mr. Mielziner was contracted to design the scenery for a particular production. The show had four sets, one of which was a living room. When he brought his first sketches to the producer, he was told that he could forget the living-room set because the producer had a big and beautiful set in a warehouse that would work adequately. While it is entirely possible that the set to which the producer referred would have been usable, it is very easy to see how the use of such a set could determine the designer's approach for the other three settings, if he wished to

achieve a consistent style. While the situation described by Mielziner is an extreme one and the practice of storing scenery has disappeared for financial reasons, the story does serve to illustrate the methods and tactics used by the producer-promoter which influence the work of a designer. One other problem created by the tendency of producers to dress up their shows often occurs in the out-of-town tryout period when a show has received doubtful reviews and the prospects for a long New York run are rather slim. At this point a producer will often call in his designer to create on a moment's notice some rather spectacular scene for new material going into the show. The problems that arise in such an instance are described by Aline Louchheim in an article in the New York Times Magazine.[10] Hectic all-night sessions at the drawing board, hurried trips to the New York scenic studios, endless hours with the stage-hands trying to solve the problems of shifting and storing the new scenery often result in a final product that is far less than the designer's original intent. The role of the designer in relationship to this producer-promoter involves the problem of the designer's willingness to sacrifice his artistic ideals or his overall intent to meet the demands of a producer. Leo Kerz writes, concerning the considerations one can and cannot make:

> I remember a scene in a well-known producer's office where after I had read the play and studied it for about a week, I outlined my ideas of combining all the different locales of the play into a single setting: a setting which was to produce all the phases and scenes of the play by means of lighting and some slight maneuvering of certain props and elements in full view of the audience. I was convinced that in the final analysis such a setting

> would project a far greater reality into the mind of the viewer than six truckloads of scenery. When I had finished my presentation, the producer gazed into the drawer of his desk and said, "I want this to look very beautiful, you know. I see this setting painted in the colors of Oklahoma!"
>
> Of course, there is nothing wrong with the colors of Oklahoma! -- for Oklahoma! This play happened to be, however, a psychological drama. Needless to say, the producer found himself a designer who saw this play as another Oklahoma![11]

Howard Bay mentions one other condition in contemporary theatre that influences what a designer does. That is the tendency of one particular designer to be "in vogue." The past few years have seen the name of Jo Mielziner at the forefront of American scene designers. Mielziner, although he has shown great versatility in that he has designed for various types of production, has of late come to be identified with psychological dramas. Alva Johnson writes of this: "In recent years Mielziner has been increasingly interested in the power of scenery to transmit psychological suggestion. The typical Mielziner setting is intended primarily not as an eye-filling spectacle, but as an array of clues, hints, symptoms, innuendoes and keys to personalities."[12]

More recently the name of Oliver Smith has come to be associated with elaborate scenic productions, the most elaborate of which is Camelot. Mr. Smith, too, has proved his versatility in that he has worked in many and varied forms, but because of popular trends his recent work has take on a recognizable trademark. Howard Bay sees these trends as a detriment to overall design and lays the blame on the designers themselves: "The other problem is the designers themselves who push out front their own trademark like any commercial

artist. Superfluous display and exhibitionism stem from the elementary fact that for all the loose talk in the abstract about the virtues of unobtrusive scenery and "imagination" the notices and the prizes fall on the show pieces. The designer is willy-nilly an entry in the race for credits."[13]

This tendency of designers to create a trademark for themselves gives rise to the fact that contemporary theatre is so highly concerned with big names. A weak show with a big star in the cast may easily ride over bad reviews on the drawing power of the star. Joseph Urban was the first designer to have his name in lights on the marquee in front of the theatre when he was working with Ziegfeld, and since his time the designer is often given equal billing with the director. Sometimes, if his name is Mielziner or Smith, he gets first billing. This all seems rather ironic when one considers that from its very beginning the new stagecraft held that the design should remain unobtrusive and the central figure, the focus of the production, must always be the actor. Today's designers, Mielziner included, still maintain that the designer's only purpose is to "aid and abet" the dramatic possibilities of a script.[14] This whole situation points up what is perhaps the source of all the problems one discovers when studying contemporary theatre -- the difference that exists between theory and practice, between the ideal and the real.

The predominance of vogues and the "big name" appeal of certain designers creates one very real and practical problem for lesser known designers in the highly competitive professional theatre of

New York. Because of the financial risks involved in producing a show, the producer will use the well-known name and will tend to ignore the equally talented but less-known designer. This, of course, is the very nature of the professional commercial theatre and is the plight of all theatrical artists.

Two other forces which have made their influence felt and do much to determine the path that scenic designers follow are the movie industry and the technological advances of the twentieth century. The movie industry has had a great effect upon the tastes of modern audiences. The movies, with their numerous "locations" and continuous action, have accustomed audiences to many scenes and rapid changes. An audience will no longer wait in the dark while scenery is changed, so designers have had to work out systems whereby the action of a play may be continuous. Thus there have developed revolving turntables, slip stages, simultaneous setting and other various devices that make continuous action possible on the stage. Jo Mielziner feels that this influence of the movies has done much to make the role of the scene designer that of a problem solver and to place emphasis on the technical craftsmanship and mechanical capabilities of the contemporary designer.

Modern technology has done much to help scene designers to realize the execution of their plans. Especially in the area of lighting, great advances have been made in the last fifty years. In 1913, when the first condensed filament in an electric lamp was invented, designers were for the first time able to concentrate and control light in specific areas. The theories of Appia, with all

their references to light, could not have been realized had it not been for the technological advances brought about in this century. Electric power replacing manpower has enabled scenery to be moved faster and more smoothly. Bright and better controlled lighting has influenced the kind of painting that the scenic artist does. The whole concept of projected scenery is an outgrowth of new technology. These and many other advances, while they have done much to help a designer solve many of his problems, have also placed demands upon a designer, in that they increase the number of areas where a designer is expected and required to be an expert and emphasize the fact that a designer must be a jack-of-all-trades. Oliver Smith has summed up the requirements of a modern stage designer when he wrote:

> To design for today's theater, I believe the following qualifications are necessary:
>
> 1. A talent for architectural design, a sense of use and dynamics of space and movement of objects in space.
> 2. The ability to paint, preferably in several styles, both abstract, romantic and realistic.
> 3. A tireless energy and adaptability to change, especially to the whimsical and naive taste of stage directors, many of whom are uninformed about architecture and painting, if not indifferent to it.
> 4. Administrative ability, the ability to organize and supervise all of the visual elements of a production. A show involves literally hundreds of workers, builders, painters, electricians, stagehands, producers, and stage managers. To meet the varied demands of these various departments means not only an organizational mind but requires the practical use of psychology as well.
> 5. A passion for the work itself. Without this not only is the work too exhausting, it is financially unrewarding.

Thus we see that the role of a scene designer is most complex.

First, he must work in a system that has no clear-cut, well-established aesthetic principles; secondly, he is often given a second-level position in that what he does is controlled by the producer-promoter-financier elements of present-day theatre; thirdly, the approach he will take is often determined by whatever vogue is popular at the time, so that a designer may do but little work at all because of the demand for the "big names;" and fourthly, because of the demands of modern audiences and advances in technology, great demands have been placed on the mechanical know-how of a designer, forcing him to become more the technician and less the artist.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Today we are in the fourth generation of scene designers since the introduction of the methods of the new stagecraft at the turn of the century. Robert Edmond Jones, Norman Bel Geddes, Lee Simonson and perhaps Joseph Urban go to make up the first and founding group. Of these four men, Lee Simonson is the only one who is still comparatively active in the American theatrical scene, now that Jones and Urban have both died and Bel Geddes is in complete retirement.

In the middle twenties a second generation emerged, spearheaded by Aline Bernstein, Cleon Throckmorton, Raymond Sovey, Jo Mielziner, Donald Oenslager and Mordecai Gorelik. Of these, Mielziner, Oenslager, and Gorelik have exerted the most influence and are still very active today. Mielziner, perhaps, has been the most prolific of all scene designers of this group, having turned out hundreds of settings since his debut in 1924. As for Sovey, Bernstein, and Throckmorton, they

have almost completely disappeared from notice and it is only in connection with the progressive contributions of American scene designers that one hears mention of their names.

"During the thirties American scene design came of age."[17] This statement may seem strange when one considers that the great reforms occurred before this. But by the thirties, when the third generation emerged, the position of the scene designer on Broadway had been pretty well established and these designers were able to utilize the aesthetic theories developed during the twenties which had now been crystallized and also the technical proficiency which has since characterized American theatre. Boris Aronson, Albert Johnson, Stewart Chaney, Howard Bay, Lemuel Ayers, Raoul Pene du Bois, Syrjala, and Harry Horner go to make up this third group. Most of these men are continuing to design today, but only Harry Horner and Howard Bay have done any extensive writing about their craft. It is interesting to note that what these two men have written does not concern itself with the aesthetics of design but with the technicalities of the system within which they have had to work.

During the Second World War the fourth generation of designers emerged, including such men as Oliver Smith, Rolf Gérard, Fredrick Fox, Horace Armistead, Leo Kerz, Wolfgang Roth, Eugene Berman and Ralph Alswang. Of these men Oliver Smith is perhaps the best known, and he (along with Leo Kerz) is the only one to have done any writing about their art. Again, they too are mostly concerned with the workings of the system that employs them -- a system that is eclectic and calls for a great versatility; a designer, in order to keep

occupied, must work in all areas of theatre: opera, ballet, the legitimate stage, movies and television.

Since there are virtually no permanent companies or endowed playhouses in this country, as there are in Europe, every production is an entity unto itself. American designers only rarely have the opportunity of working with just one director and as a result there has never developed one single style of production, as was witnessed on the European scene with Jacques Copeau and the Vieux-Colombier in France, the productions of Max Reinhardt in Germany and those of Meyerhold in Russia. The American scene designer must perform equally well in all styles, for while realism remains the predominant form of expression for American playwrights, the designer must display a great variety of methods and styles, ranging from realism to decorative simplification, formalism, and all the other various isms which have had their vogue since the introduction of the new stagecraft.

There is one other point to take into consideration before I look more closely at the work of one of these fourth-generation designers, and that is the fact that the number of legitimate theatres in New York has been steadily decreasing. In 1928 there were eighty legitimate houses, but by 1947 the number had been reduced to thirty-two. The fact that fewer shows are being done has forced designers to take work, not only in other areas -- the ballet, opera, movies, etc. -- but it has forced them to look away from Broadway to off-Broadway and the hinterlands for work. Therefore, a representative designer, unless he happens to be "in

vogue" or his name has popular appeal, will have worked in many areas, in many styles, and in many places. It is with these considerations in mind that I shall investigate the work of Wolfgang Roth.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Wolfgang Roth, who today is predominantly a theatrical designer, has made contributions to all the various arts of the theatre. As an apprentice designer to Erwin Piscator in Berlin, Germany, he started his professional career by painting scenery, sweeping floors and doing general stagehand work. He has acted, directed, practiced the art of mime, has been a dancer, a clown, and a producer of his own show. Before coming to America in 1938, Roth had studied decorative painting in Berlin and while still an apprentice designer for Piscator he did designs for the German state theatres in and around Berlin.

When Hitler rose to power in 1933, Roth left Germany and moved to Austria, where he worked for a year doing both scene designs and interior and exterior architecture. After spending a year in Vienna, he moved to Zurich, Switzerland, where he practiced all the theatrical arts: designing for both the legitimate stage and the musical theatre, besides performing as a clown in vaudeville and in the circus. While in Zurich Roth collaborated with Bertolt Brecht on productions. This collaboration seems quite natural, since Roth's former teacher, Erwin Piscator, had a great and lasting influence on Brecht and it is from Piscator that many of the techniques of "epic theatre" derive.

Since Roth came to America he has designed thirteen Broadway productions, seven off-Broadway productions, designed six productions for the Metropolitan Opera, has been designer and art director for opera companies in Boston, Cincinnati and Toronto, Canada, and has been technical supervisor for the Sol Hurok Company, where he has been associated with such internationally famous groups as the Jean-Louis Barrault Company, The Kabuki Dancers, The Sadler's Wells Ballet and the Comédie Française. In addition he has designed for the Margaret Webster Touring Shakespeare Company, The Boston Repertory Theatre, International Theatre Festivals in Berlin (1951) and in Paris (1955), and has managed, directed and designed his own show, "The Littlest Circus," for New York and a national tour.

Having worked with all these groups, Mr. Roth has had an opportunity to show great versatility and skill in dealing with the various problems of the theatrical forms. He has worked in a realistic mode and has also displayed talent for working in a wide range of styles.

NOTES

1. Robert Edmond Jones, The Dramatic Imagination, Duell, Sloan and Pearce (New York, 1941), pp. 23-24.

2. Sheldon Cheney, Stage Decoration, Chapman and Hall, Ltd. (London, 1928), p. 96.

3. "The Artist in the American Theatre: Illustrated by the Work of American Stage-Craftsmen," Touchstone, Vol. 5, No. 1 (April, 1919), p. 78.

4. Jones, p. 70.

5. Charles Henry Meltzer, "The Advance in Scenic Art," Theatre, Magazine, Vol. 31 (May, 1920), pp. 23-24.

6. Howard Bay, "Scene Design for Musical Comedy," Theatre Arts, Vol. 43 (April, 1959), p. 56.

7. Howard Bay, "Settings," Theatre Arts, Vol. 37 (February, 1953), p. 67.

8. Ibid.

9. Alva Johnson, "Jo Mielziner -- Aider and Abettor," The New Yorker, Vol. 24 (October 23, 1948), p. 38.

10. Aline Louchheim, "Script to Stage: Case History of a Set," New York Times Magazine (December 9, 1951), pp. 24ff.

11. Leo Kerz, "Scenery or Stage Settings," New York Times (August 2, 1954), II, 1.

12. Johnson, 40.

13. Howard Bay, "Settings," p. 70.

14. Johnson, p. 42.

15. Ibid., p. 39.

16. Oliver Smith, "Musical Comedy Design for Stage and Screen," in Scene Design for Stage and Screen, ed. Orville K. Larsen, Michigan State University Press (East Lansing, 1961), p. 191.

17. Scene Design for Stage and Screen, xiv.

WOLFGANG ROTH: ARTIST AND TECHNICIAN

Since Mr. Roth's first contacts with the professional theatre were with Erwin Piscator, it is only natural that some of his work should reflect the ideas of this great German innovator. I have said that Piscator's techniques greatly influenced Brecht and established a foundation for Brecht's "epic theatre." Piscator's methods are described by Martin Esslin in his book, Brecht: The Man and His Work.

> And finally there was the radically left-wing Agitprop theatre of Piscator, who regarded the stage as above all an instrument for mobilizing the masses. Piscator relegated the author to a relatively minor position and was often content to compile his productions out of newspaper reports or documentary material. He put these spectacles on a constructivist stage and used graphs of statistics, explanatory captions, lantern slides of photographs or documents, newsreels and documentary film sequences to convey the political or sociological background of the play, while the propaganda lesson was drawn

> by choruses spoken or sung on stage or in the auditorium so that the spectators were inevitably drawn into the action. His aim was a theatre that would be political, technological -- and EPIC. By the latter word he meant a drama that would be utterly different from the conventional "well-made" play -- a kind of illustrated lecture or newspaper report on a political or social theme, loosely constructed in the shape of a serious revue, a sequence of musical numbers, sketches, film and declamation sometimes linked by one or several narrators.[1]

The work of Mr. Roth that best represents Piscator's influence is the design he did for a modern oratorio-cantata called "Jemand" which was produced in Zurich in 1938. From the illustration on page 37 we can see the extreme constructivism of Roth's platforms and stairway arrangements. No attempt has been made to disguise the construction of the platforms, and the crane-like structure in the background emphasized the mechanical aspects of the design. There is very little that is pictorial about this design and one gets the impression that the main purpose of the arrangement was properly to locate and arrange the masses of people who compose the chorus and orchestra. One's eye is immediately drawn to the large white rectangular screen which dominates the center of the stage. This, of course, was used to reflect the newsreels or the lantern slides which would appear during the performance in order to emphasize the points made by the libretto.

It is interesting to compare the two photographs on this page and see what changes Roth has had to make from his original model on the left to the actual setting, photographed on the right. It is apparent that because of the low ceiling in the hall where the oratorio was presented Roth had to sacrifice the overall height

FIGURE 1

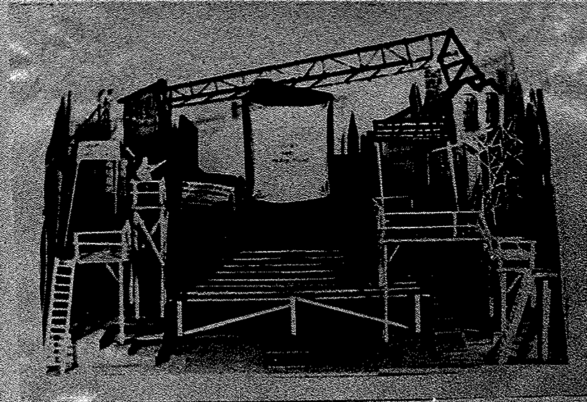
"Jemand"

Wolfgang Roth, Designer

1938, Zurich, Switzerland

Photograph of model on the left

Photograph of production on the right

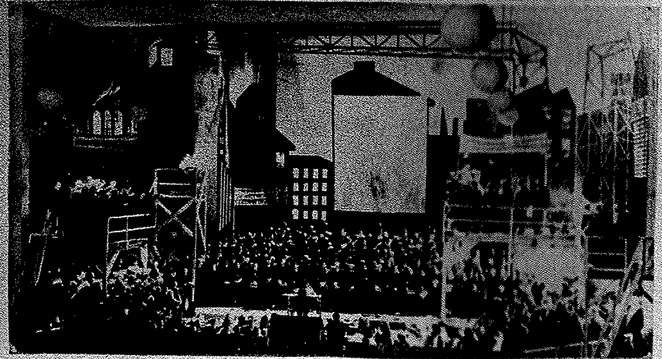


"JEMAND"

(MODERN ORATORIO - CANTATA)

ZURICH - SWITZERLAND

1935



of his design. The crane-like structure has been built on a horizontal line rather than on a diagonal as was intended. The width of the stage area is considerably greater than that in the model, and the overall effect of the design becomes more horizontal in line than was the original idea.

While in Zurich Roth designed the sets for one of Bertolt Brecht's productions. The play was one of Brecht's own, called Pointed Heads and Round Heads, and strangely enough the designs reflect none of the "epic theatre" techniques. The sets were designed for a turntable stage with a painted cyclorama and from the photographs of Roth's original sketches on page 39 we can see that the approach he used was quite pictorial, quite unlike the "non-setting" which Roth was later to design for The Good Woman of Setzuan in 1956 or Brecht on Brecht in 1961. The photograph in the extreme upper right is obviously the design for the painted cyclorama against which the sets of the other photographs played.

Again a product of Roth's stay in Zurich is his interesting design of a one-unit turntable setting for Mozart's Cosi Fan Tutte. The model, pictured on page 40, shows a complete architectural structure of a house and garden, allowing for rather realistic scenes of both interiors and exteriors. Somehow the whole set gives a rather heavy feeling, quite unlike the mood of Mozart's opera. For the most part the house is made of rather stark and angular lines, which do not seem to correspond to the Baroque quality of the music.

This setting for Cosi Fan Tutte is one of Mr. Roth's early opera sets, and in the following years he was to design many sets

FIGURE 2

Pointed Heads and Round Heads

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1938, Zurich, Switzerland

Photograph of original sketches

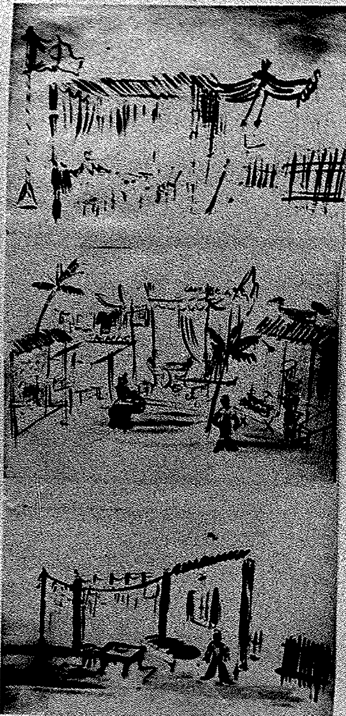


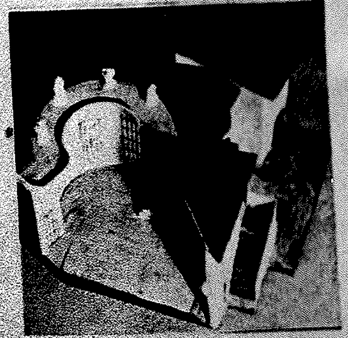
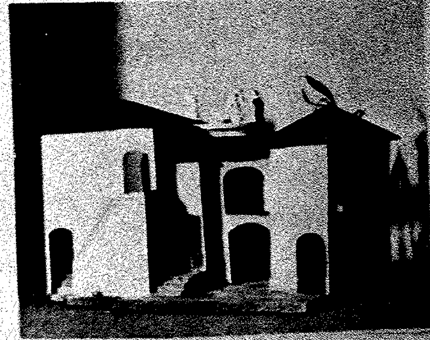
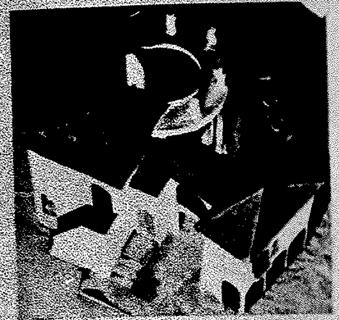
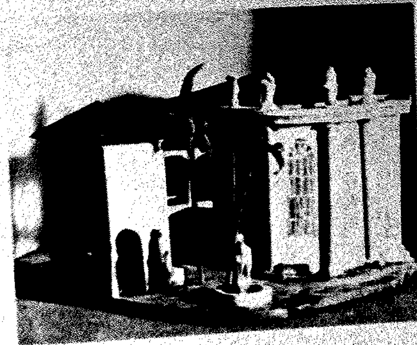
FIGURE 3

Cosî Fan Tutte

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1937, Salzburg

Six photographs of designer's model

COSI FAN TUTTI (OPERA) 1937
(TURNTABLE-STAGE)

for operatic companies in the United States, Canada and Europe. Many of his opera sets were done for the Cincinnati Summer Opera Company when he was their designer and art director for the years 1959, 1960 and 1961. Following is a list of some of the operas for which he did settings during those three summers:

La Boheme	Puccini
Susannah	Floyd
Macbeth	Verdi
La Traviata	Verdi
Salome	Strauss
Peter Grimes	Britten
Don Giovanni	Mozart
Don Carlo	Verdi
Madame Butterfly	Puccini
Carmen	Bizet

The Cincinnati Opera Company is one of the many smaller operatic groups which have appeared on the American scene with the recent upsurge in community and tributary theatre in this country. Their operation is on a considerably smaller scale than companies like the Chicago Civic, the Metropolitan, or the San Francisco Opera Company, and it is therefore necessary to find an economical solution to production costs. Grand opera, from its inception, has been produced on a lavish scale with many extravagant, highly decorative setting. A designer's chief problem when working for a group like the Cincinnati organization is to find a solution to the problem of creating sets that will retain the lavish qualities of grand opera without exceeding the production costs allowed to a small company. The sets will have to be majestic enough to suit the broad action of musical theatre, yet flexible enough to be changed in the required time without employing a large group of stagehands. The

logical solution and the one used by Mr. Roth is the use of a unit setting that can be changed by replacing panels or similar pieces that will alter the basic structure enough to create a completely different locale.

From the photographs of his original sketches of the sets for Don Giovanni on pages 43 through 46, we can see that Mr. Roth constructed a permanent unit consisting of a lattice-like structure to the full height of the proscenium on stage right. This unit is suggestive of Spanish architecture and helps establish the setting of the play. On stage left he built another structure representing the exterior of a house with a door opening onto a patio, with balcony windows overhead. This unit is also proscenium height and balances the lattice-work on stage right. These two pieces are connected by six arches in a semi-circular pattern which encloses the principal acting area. Behind these arches we can see the backdrops used to differentiate the various scenes. The pillars which make up the legs of the arches are actually pivoting panels which are painted on one side so as to blend into the backdrop when representing an outdoor scene, and painted in a sharp contrasting pattern on the other side so as to represent a solid wall for interior scenes. A variety of props are used to contribute to the scene changes. During the banquet scene, for instance, the panels are turned to their interior position so as to stand out against the backdrop and to each panel he has added an elegant chandelier to help establish an "expensive" atmosphere as well as to stress an interior setting.

FIGURE 4

Don Giovanni

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1960, Cincinnati Summer Opera

Photograph of original sketch

Act I, Scene 1: Garden, Donna Anna's House

FIGURE 5

Don Giovanni

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1960, Cincinnati Summer Opera

Photograph of original sketch

Act I, Scene 3: Masquers' Scene

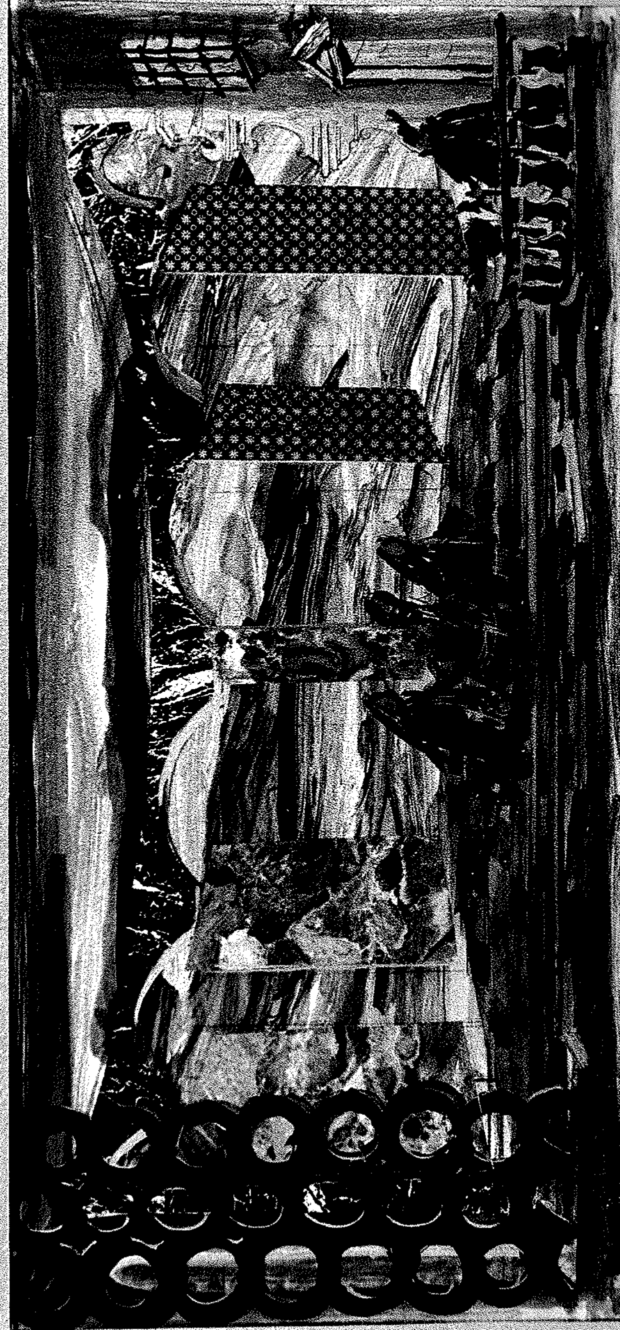


FIGURE 6

Don Giovanni

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1960, Cincinnati Summer Opera

Photograph of original sketch

Act I, Scene 4: Ballroom in Don Giovanni's House

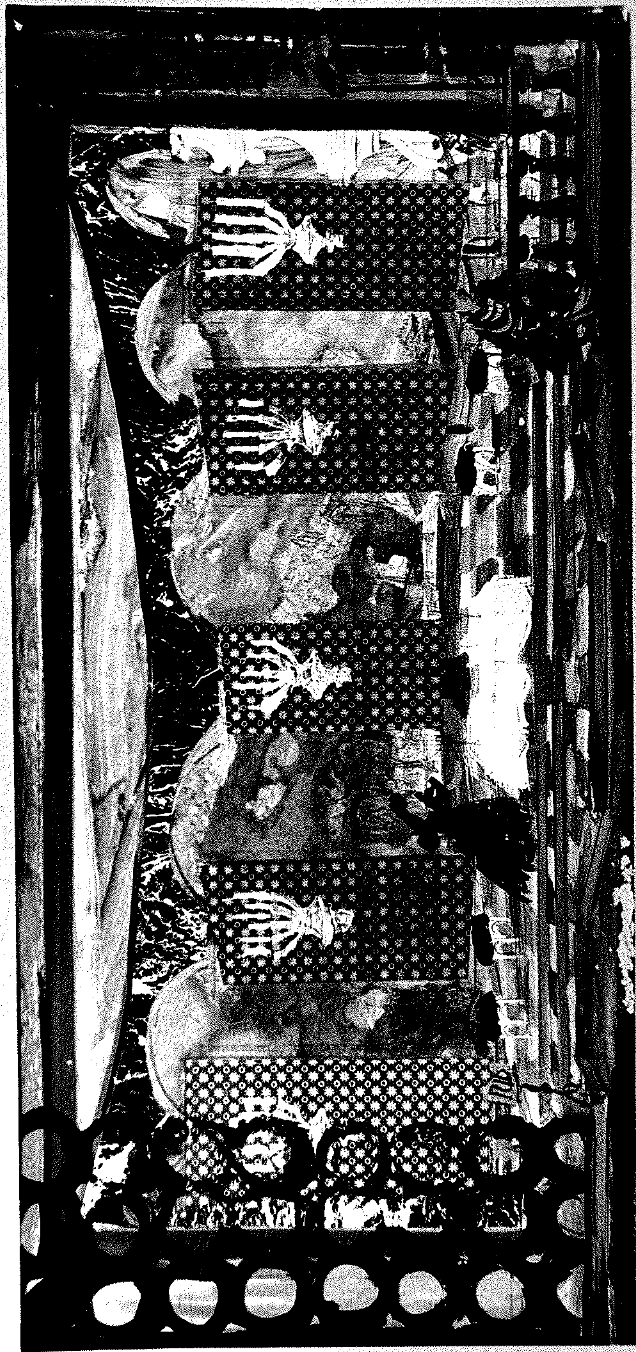


FIGURE 6

<u>Don Giovanni</u>

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1960, Cincinnati Summer Opera

Photograph of original sketch

Act I, Scene 4: Ballroom in Don Giovanni's House

FIGURE 7

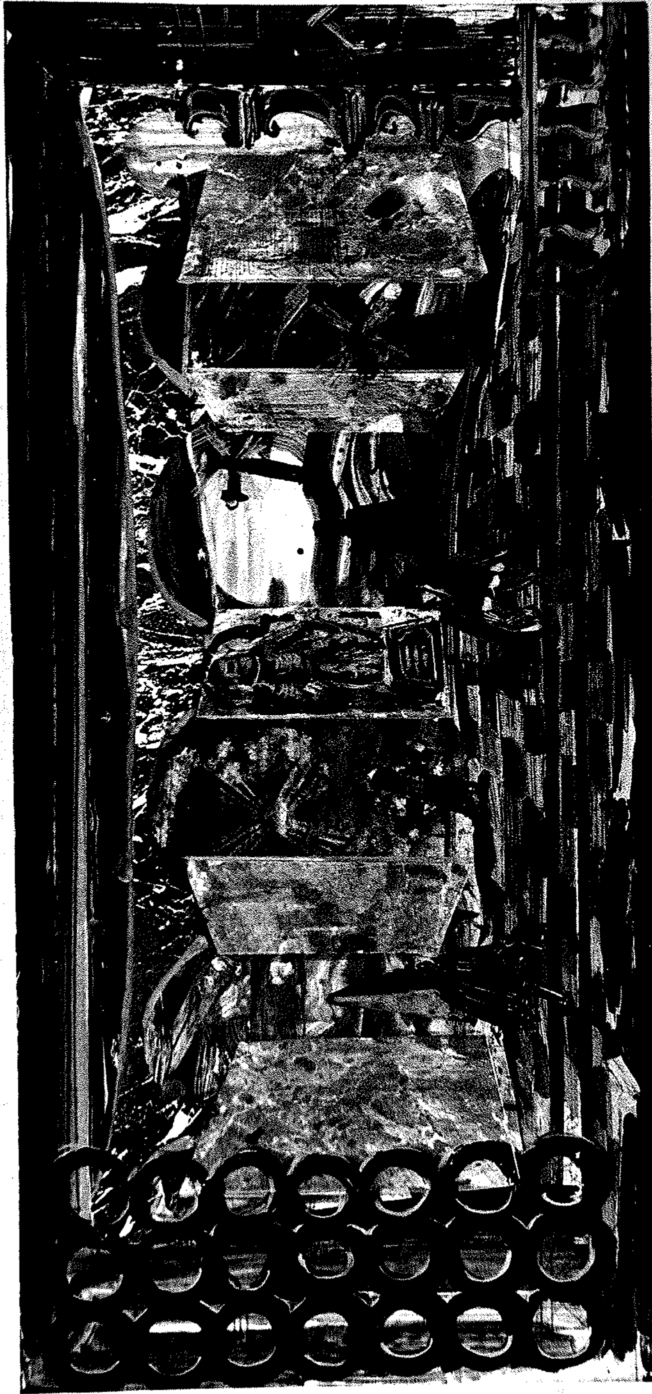
Don Giovanni

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1960, Cincinnati Summer Opera

Photograph of original sketch

Act II, Scene 3: Cemetery



For the scene where Don Giovanni is confronted by the statue, the panels have their exterior side exposed and against the upstage center panel he has placed the statue. The backdrop for this scene is changed and on it we see the silhouette of various tombstones against a rather large moon. The backdrop and the prop tombstones which occupy the acting area establish this locale as a cemetery and go to make up the murky atmosphere for Don Giovanni's impending doom.

This approach to Don Giovanni seems to provide a very workable solution to the designer's problems. The permanent units help establish the eloquence needed for the opera and the pivoting panels allow for fast changes without the need for large crews.

A similar approach to that which was used for Don Giovanni was used in the 1960 production of Verdi's opera Macbeth. Here again several different scenes had to be created for the variety of locales required in the libretto, and yet the need for economy suggested a simplified for of staging without damaging the somber, almost barbaric quality of the opera. Once again Mr. Roth constructed permanent structure on stage right and stage left. The photographs of his original sketches on pages 48 through 52 show that he built large stone-like units forming entrances downstage right and left. These massive pieces are not unlike the formations found in England's famous Stonehenge and they help to establish an atmosphere suggesting a time before recorded history. The central portion of the stage is occupied by ramps and platforms surrounded by more massive structures making sharp horizontal and vertical lines against a backdrop which is lighted to suggest the time and

FIGURE 8

Macbeth

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1961, Cincinnati Summer Opera

Photograph of original sketch

Three Witches

FIGURE 9

Macbeth

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1961, Cincinnati Summer Opera

Photograph of original sketch

Macbeth's Castle

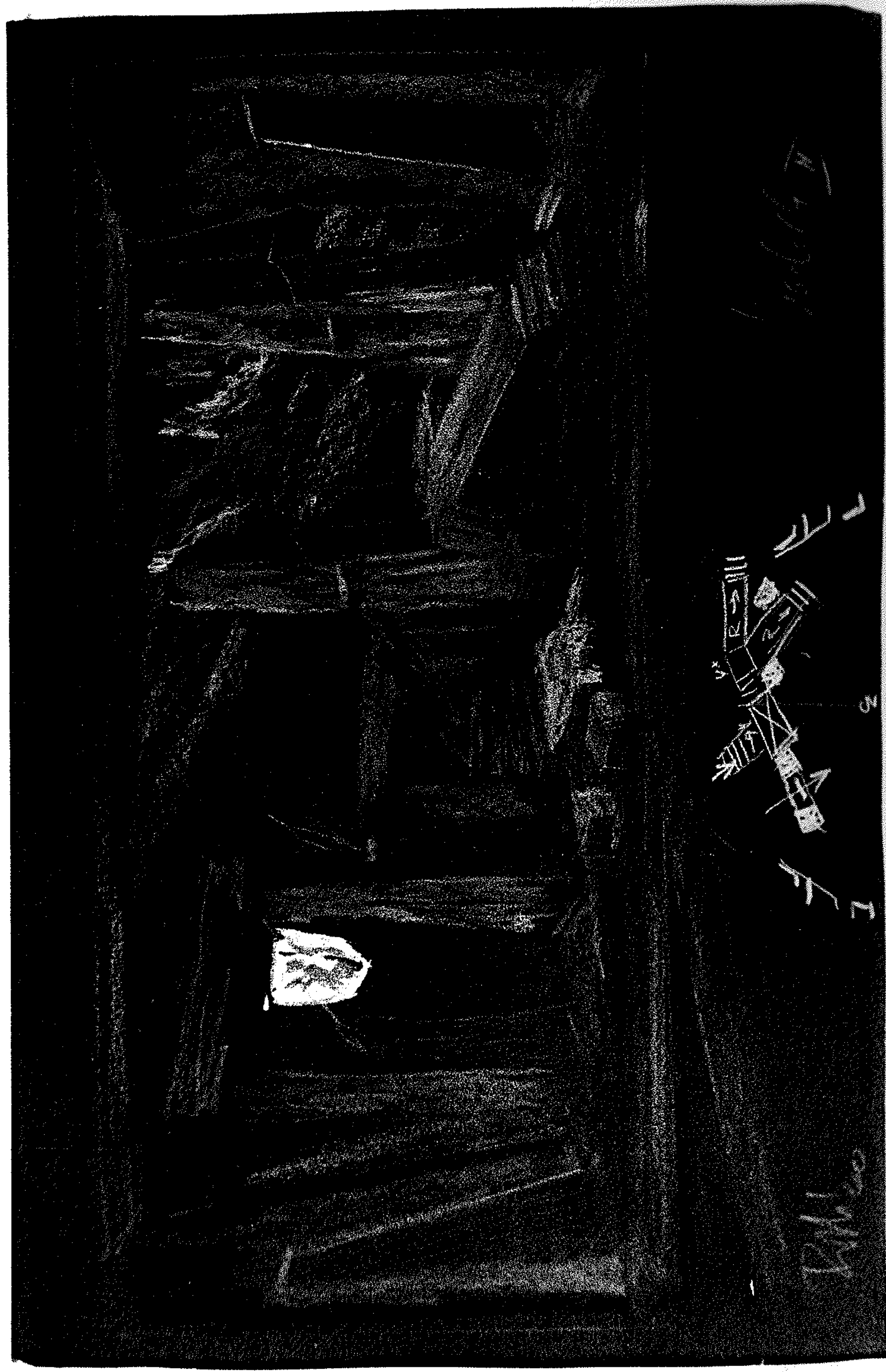


FIGURE 10

Macbeth

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1961, Cincinnati Summer Opera

Photograph of original sketch

Sleepwalking Scene

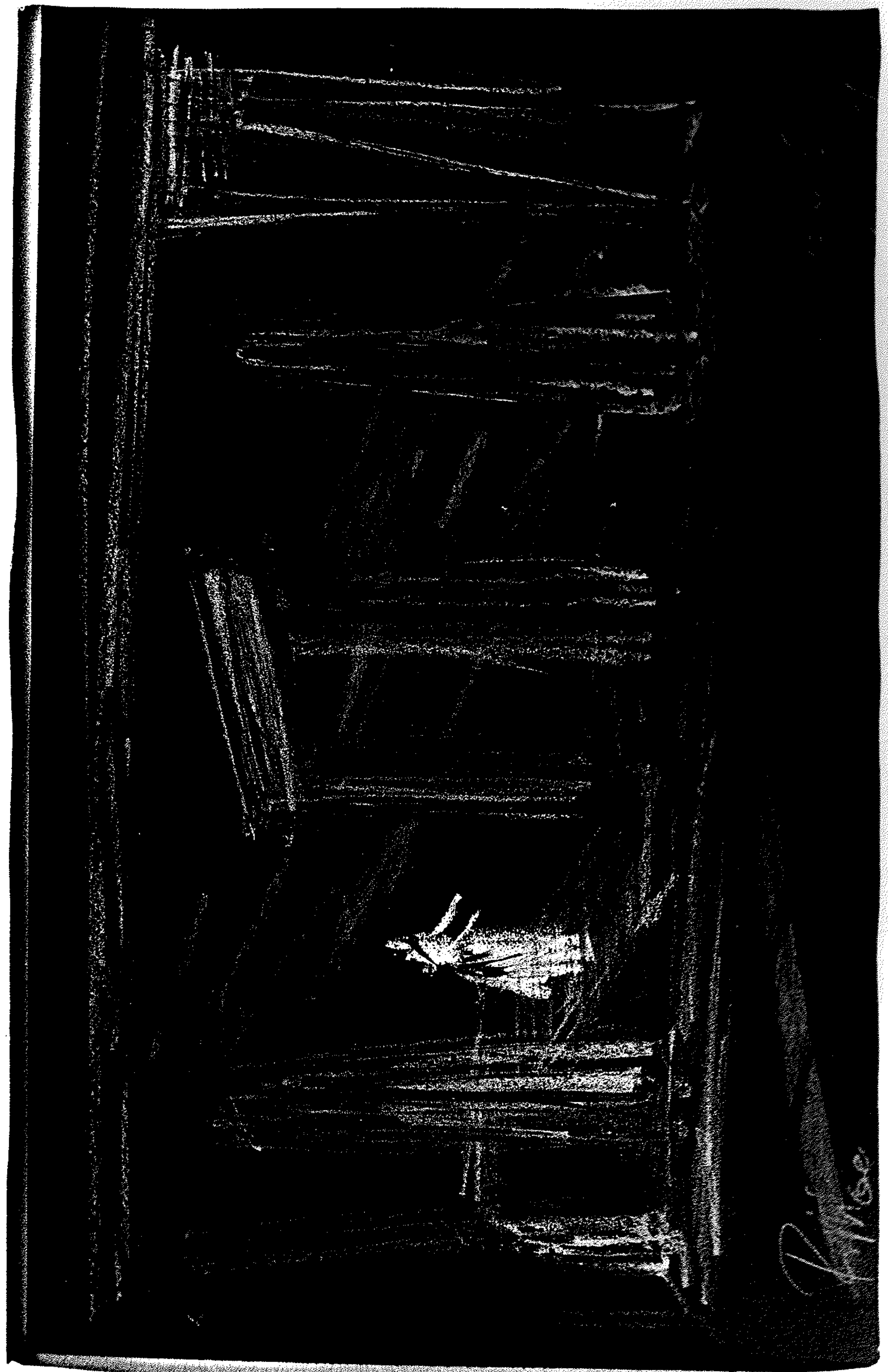


FIGURE 11

Macbeth

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1961, Cincinnati Summer Opera

Photograph of Original sketch

Battle Scene

FIGURE 12

Macbeth

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1961, Cincinnati Summer Opera

Photograph of original sketch

Finale

mood of the action. These units are moved from scene to scene and no great attempt is made to establish specific locales or to disguise the fact that all the settings are constructed through such rearrangements. The scene inside Macbeth's castle is very similar to the scene in which he is confronted by the three witches. The units have been moved to different positions and only a bearskin and two box-like stools have been added to represent an interior. For the sleepwalking scene and the battle scene the units and ramps are in exactly the same positions; only a banner has been added for the battle scene, with different light patterns on the backdrop working to establish different moods for the two scenes. For the final scene, two of the large vertical structures have collapsed and are lying on the ground, symbolizing the destruction of the main character.

It is obvious that no great attempt was made to differentiate among locales in the settings for Macbeth, as there had been in Don Giovanni, which was more concerned with realistic detail and specific milieu. Both sets are successful in their attempts and both provide an adequate solution to the problems they pose.

The opera La Boheme, produced in the 1959 season, posed quite a different problem for Mr. Roth. While Puccini's opera is very romantic, the libretto calls for a very realistic approach in the settings, each of the three requiring its own special mood. The first act takes place in an attic studio and is gloomy in its mood. The second-act setting is a Parisian marketplace at Christmas time and the mood is light and frivolous. The third act calls for a

FIGURE 13

La Boheme

Wolfgang Roth, designer *

1960, Cincinnati Summer Theatre

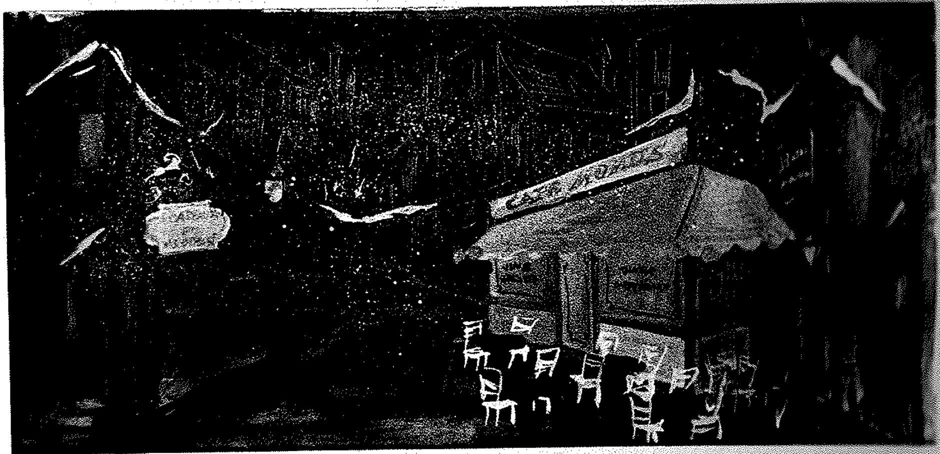
Photographs of original sketches

From top to bottom:

Act I: A Garret Studio

Act II: A Parisian Street

Act III: Outside a Tavern



PORTE D'ORLEANS

scene outside an inn with snow falling, and the mood is tender and romantic. Once again Mr. Roth has worked within a basic structure, which appears in all three scenes. The structure in this case is a skeletal framework which in the first scene establishes the walls of the attic studio, through which can be seen the rooftops and chimneys of the Paris skyline. Very realistic props are set within this open framework and curtains are attached to suggest walls and windows. For the marketplace scene in the second act, Mr. Roth has left this frame structure in the same position and has inserted set pieces suggesting a sidewalk café and other assorted shops. The backdrop has been changed to suggest many buildings in the background and once again realistic props are used. For the third-act scene outside a tavern, one section of the unit framework has been swung upstage and we are looking down a street. Part of the unit becomes the framework for an iron fence and another part houses the façade of a group of buildings. The backdrop in this case is a plan grey sky and a light cover of snow hangs on the iron fence and on the eaves of the buildings. Because of meticulous attention to detail in the use of properties and decorations, these three sets, while they are built around a single structure, appear to be completely different and are highly convincing in their suggestive realism.

Mr. Roth has also designed settings for the Metropolitan Opera Company of New York and even here, where the country's most lavish operas are produced, he shows a remarkable economy of space and mechanics in his designs. He has designed the following productions

FIGURE 14

Don Pasquale

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1955, Metropolitan Opera Company

Photograph of original sketch

and floor plan: Act I

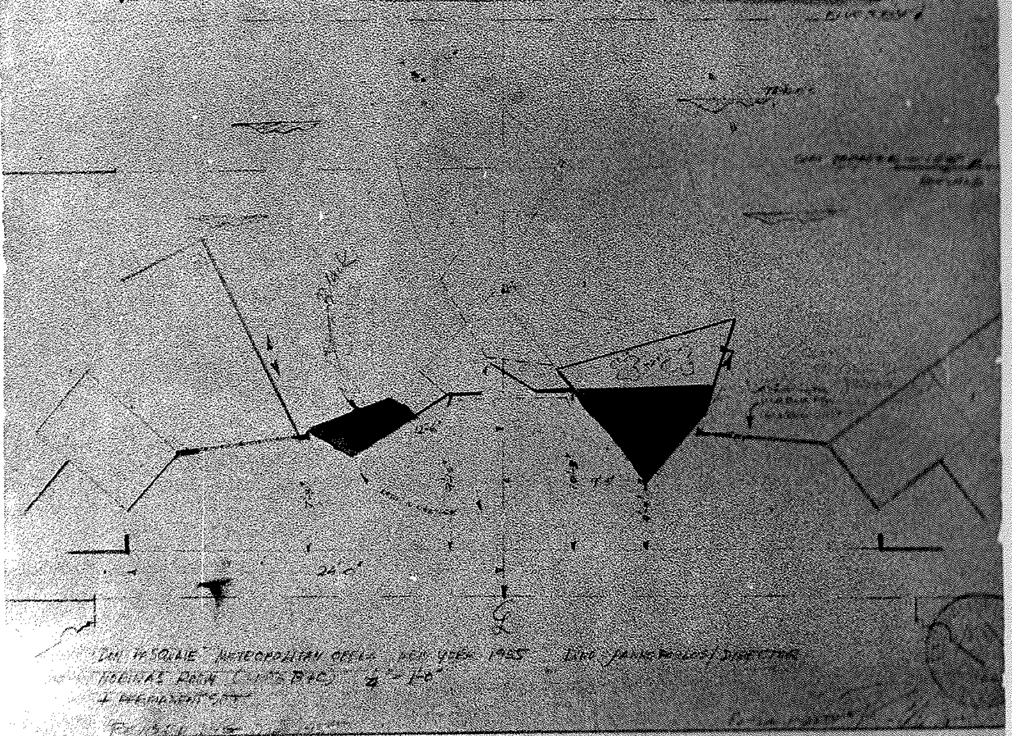

METROPOLITAN OPERA NEW YORK 1955

FIGURE 15

Don Pasquale

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1955, Metropolitan Opera Company

Photograph of original sketch

and floor plan: Act II

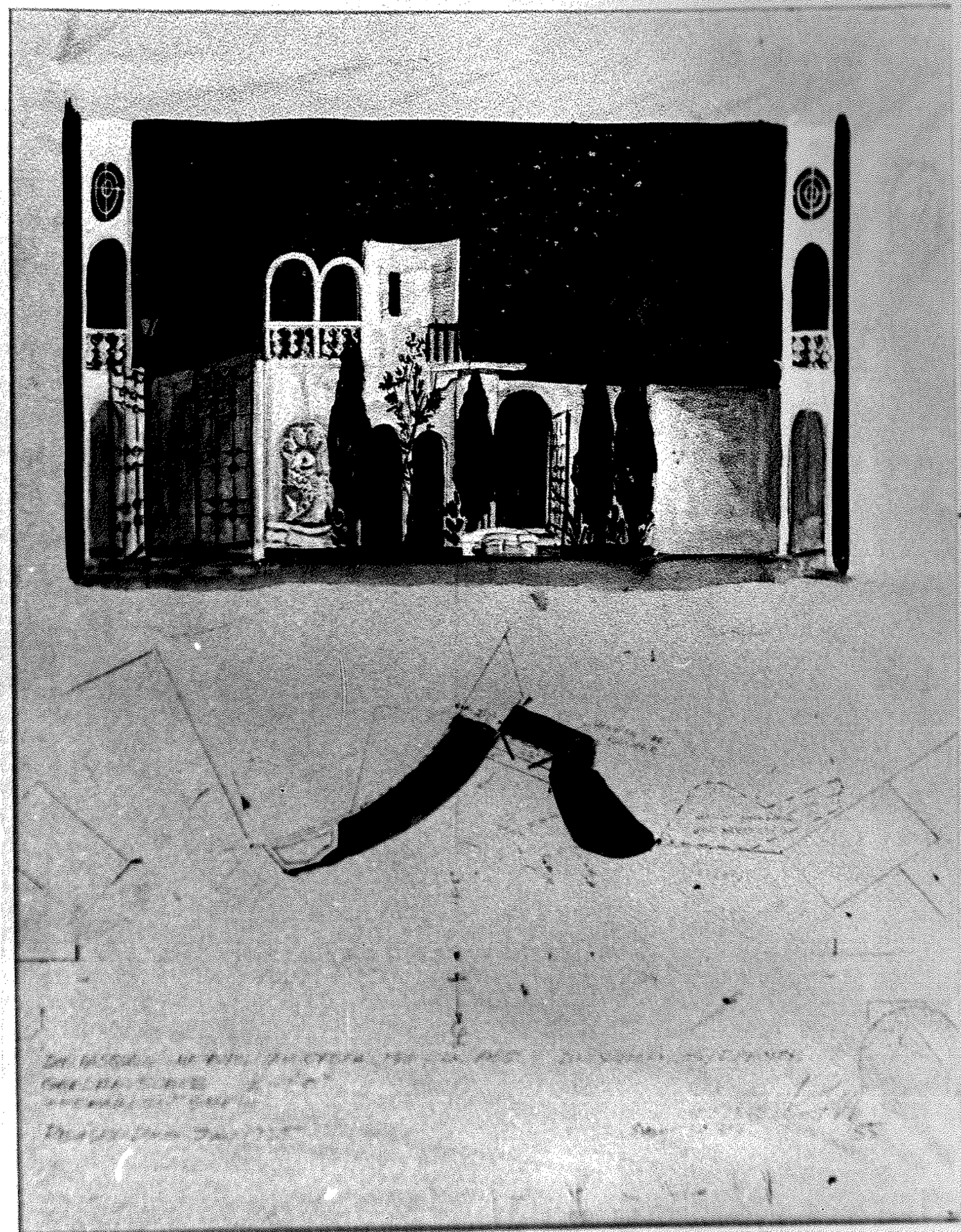


FIGURE 16

<u>Macbeth</u>

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1948, Margaret Webster Touring Shakespeare Company

Photograph of original sketch

Three Witches

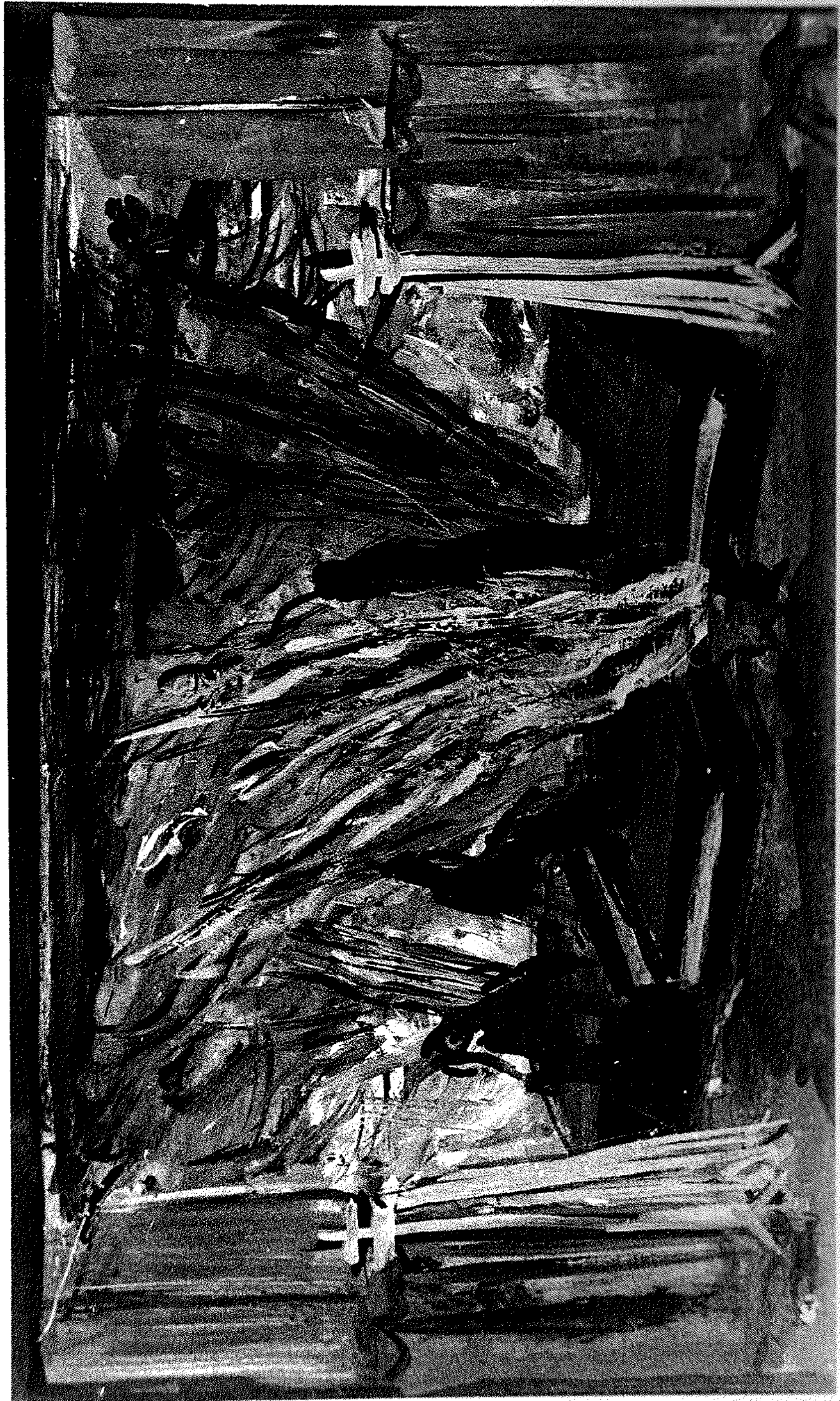


FIGURE 17

Macbeth

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1948, Margaret Webster Touring Shakespeare Company

Photograph of original sketch

Cover scenes for set changes

FIGURE 18

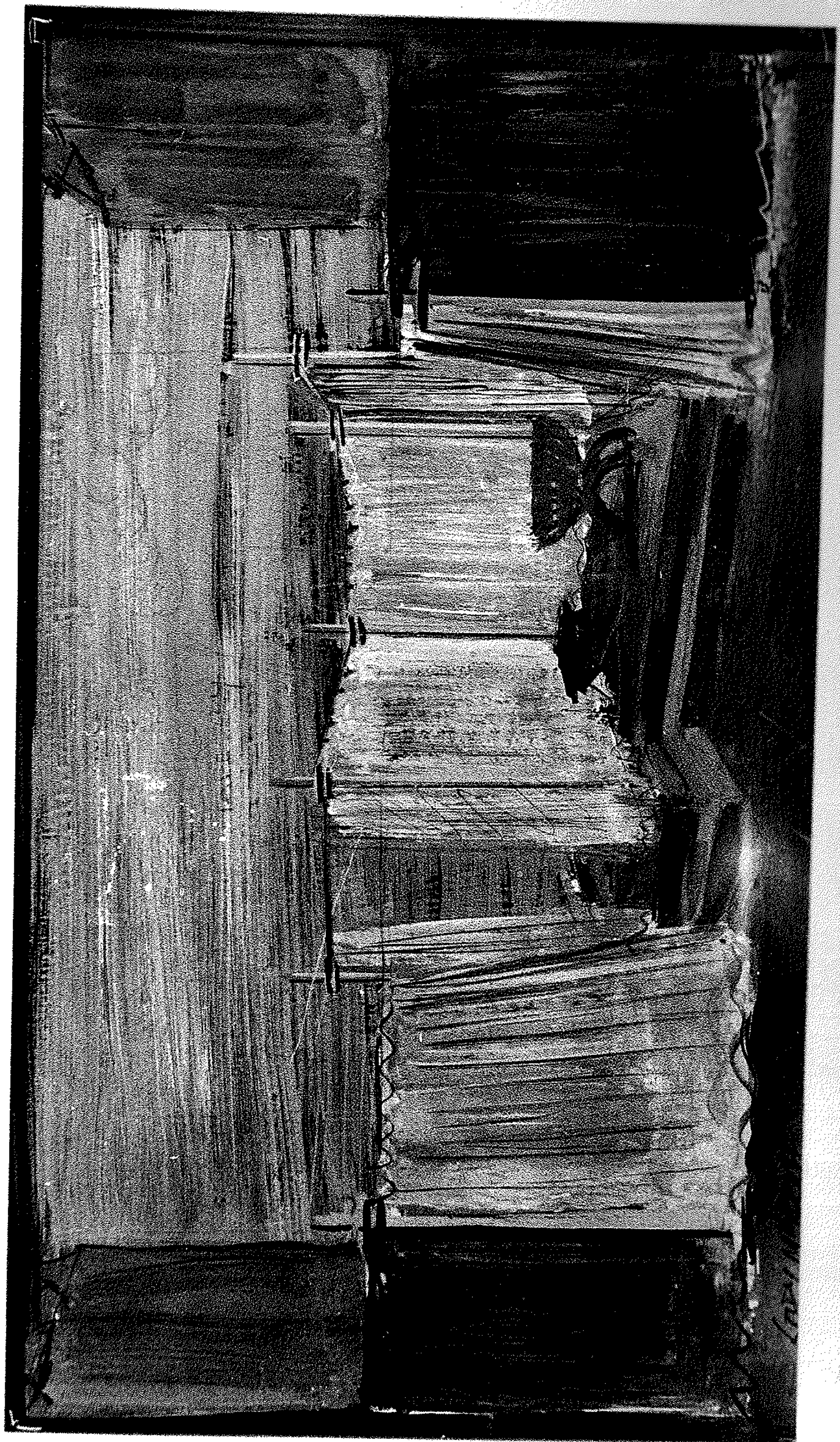
Macbeth

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1948, Margaret Webster Touring Shakespeare Company

Photograph of original sketch

Lady Macduff's Chamber



Various locales were established by the use of platforms and props. The whole setting was easily set up and struck in a short time and posed no problems for loading and shipping; yet in spite of its economy, it allowed the numerous set changes to be made without interrupting the action of the play. It is interesting to note that the technique which Mr. Roth employed for scene changes in this instance is identical to the techniques used for scene changes in musical comedies.

When Mr. Roth designed the setting for the 1956 revival of Johnny Johnson he used a technique quite different from the usual approach to a musical. While Johnny Johnson is not a typical musical and is more aptly called a play with songs, its construction is like a musical in that it contains fourteen different settings which have to be changed with lightning speed in order not to interrupt the flow of the drama. When the Group Theatre first produced this play in 1936, Donald Oenslager created starkly expressionistic sets which employed distorted scenery and props. Twenty years later the expressionistic vogue of the thirties had passed and Mr. Roth created sets which can best be put into the category of selective realism. From the photographs of his original sketches, on pages 63 through 68, we see that he established the many scenes by placing realistic props against a series of seven pivoting scrim panels which swung open to reveal a backdrop on which various images could be projected to suggest the exterior scenes. These scrim panels remained closed for interior scenes. The approach is very similar to the approach used in his sets for

FIGURE 19

Johnny Johnson

Wolfgang Roth, designer*

1956, Stella Adler production

Photograph of original sketch

Act I, Scene 1: A Hilltop Outside

a Small American Town

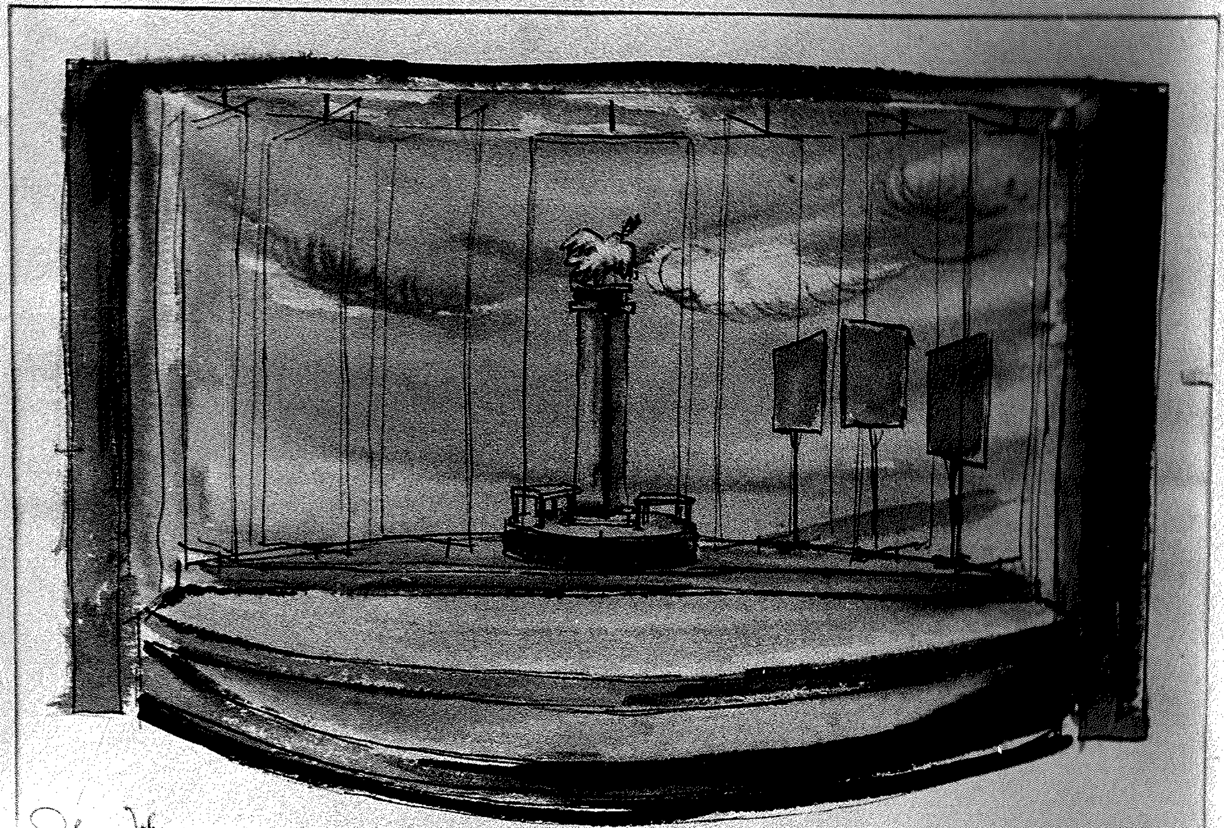

Johnny Johnson
6 Prayer Scene

FIGURE 20

Johnny Johnson

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1956, Stella Adler production

Photograph of original sketch

Act I, Scene 2: The Tompkins Home

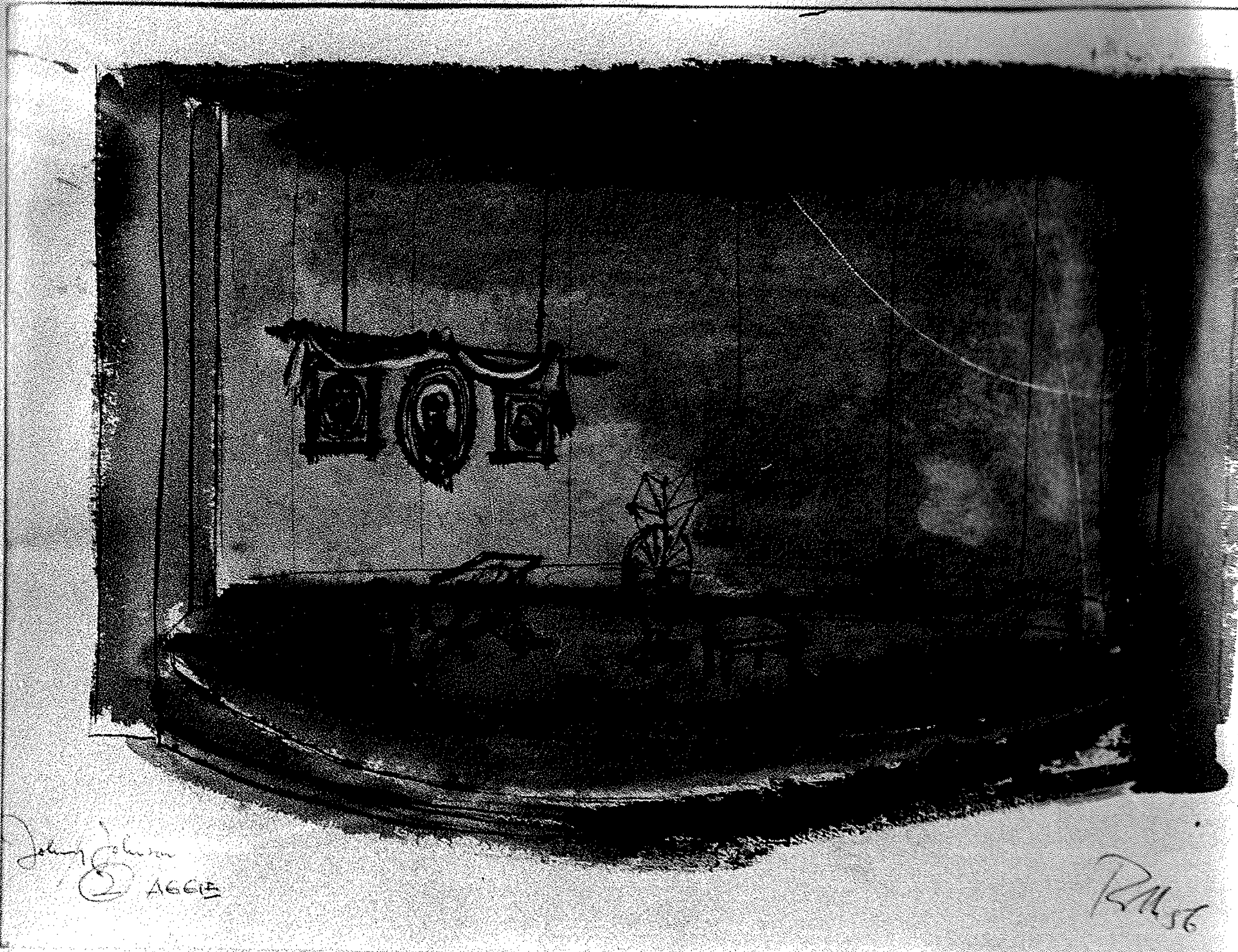

Johnny Johnson
2 AGGIE
RM 56

FIGURE 21

Johnny Johnson

Wolfgang Roth, designer*

1956, Stella Adler production

Photograph of original sketch

Act II, Scene 2: The Front-Line Trench

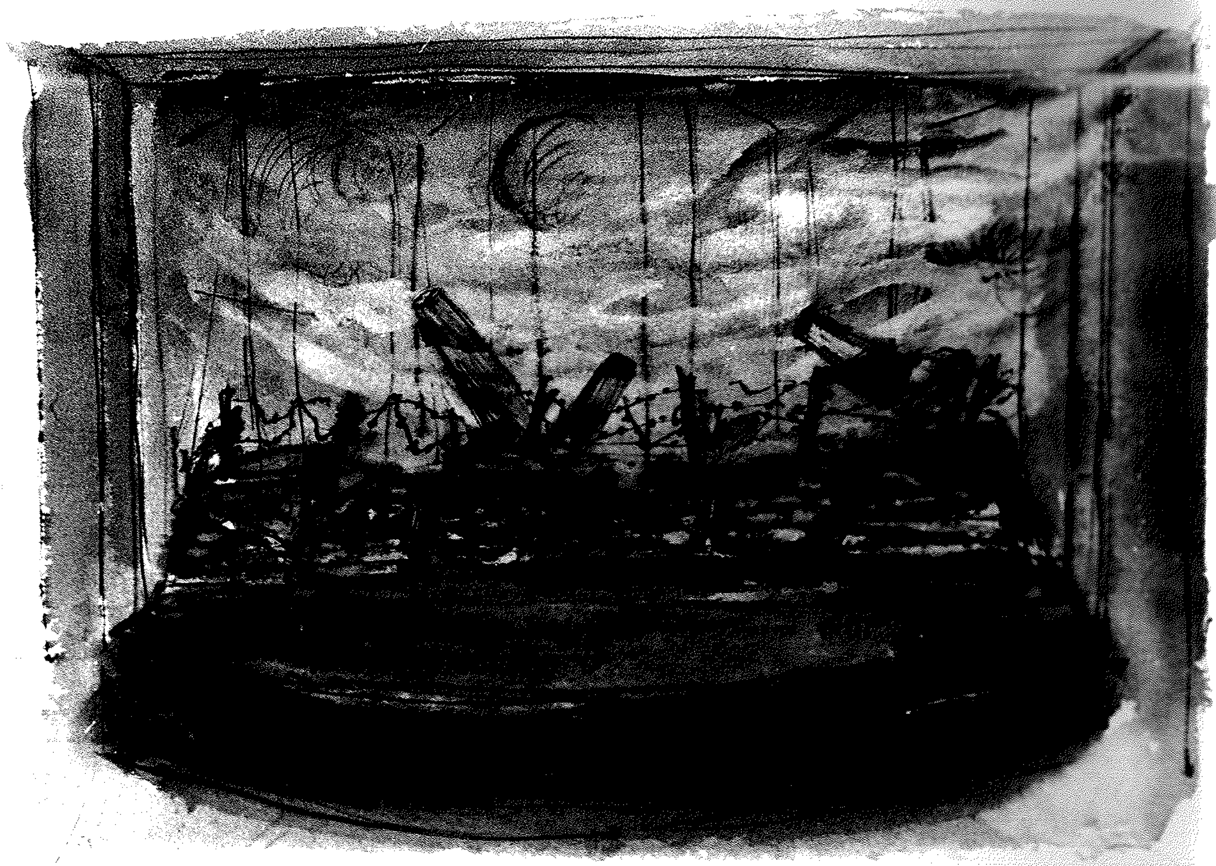


FIGURE 22

Johnny Johnson

Wolfgang Roth, designer*

1956, Stella Adler production

Photograph of original sketch

Act II, Scene 3: A Ruined Churchyard

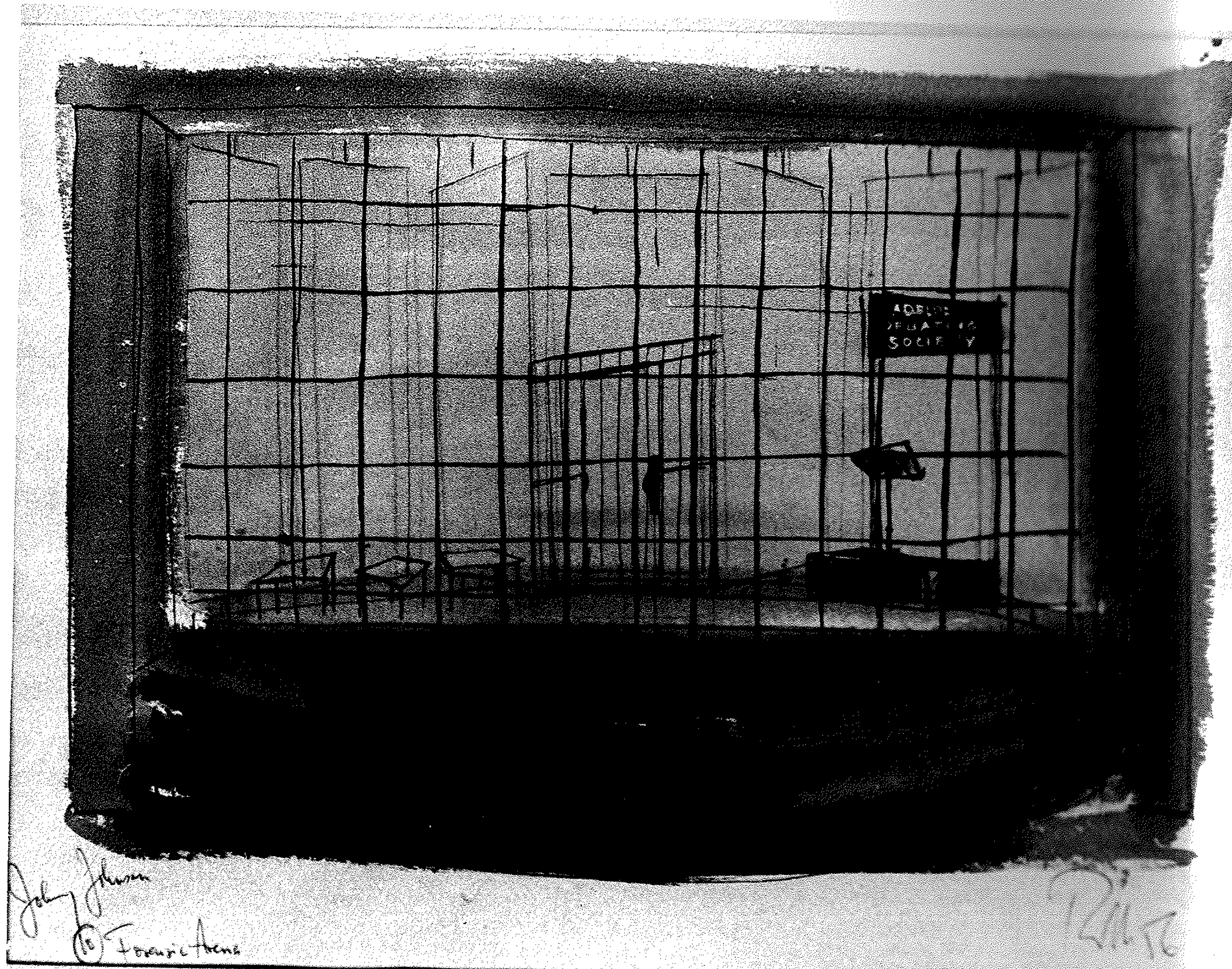

Johnny Johnson
(15) Forensic Arena

FIGURE 24

Johnny Johnson

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1956, Stella Adler, production

Photograph of original sketch

Act III, Scene 3: A Street

Johnny Johnson
(11) Toys, Toys...

the opera Macbeth, discussed earlier in this section. We can see that this use of the pivoting panels allowed for fast scene changes and permitted the continuous flow of the drama which is demanded by contemporary audiences.

Sometimes, in order to help create a particular mood, period plays are produced in the theatrical style of the play's original production. Wolfgang Roth has created settings for two different productions in which this approach was employed. In one, a production of Sheridan's School for Scandal, his sets are reminiscent of the eighteenth century's use of painted backdrops done in a very baroque style. Mr. Roth created an ornate proscenium with a drop-curtain immediately in back of it. This curtain rose to reveal various box-like sets which were painted in the same baroque-rococo manner as the proscenium and the act curtain. The photograph on page 70 shows Roth's detailed pencil sketches for this project.

On another occasion he designed for a production of Rolf Lieberman's opera, School for Wives, adapted from Molière's comedy. In this instance Mr. Roth created a caricature of sixteenth-century forced-perspective scenery. The photograph on page 71 shows set pieces designed and painted in a very deliberate perspective disappearing to two different vanishing points. The bold colors of the painted floor and the angular checkerboard pattern on the set piece on stage right brings to mind the patterns used in the costumes of the commedia dell'arte and thereby carries through the caricature style of the scenery. From the painting elevations pictured on page 72 we can see that only one of these set pieces

FIGURE 25

School for Scandal

Wolfgang Roth, designer

A Project

Photograph of original pencil drawings

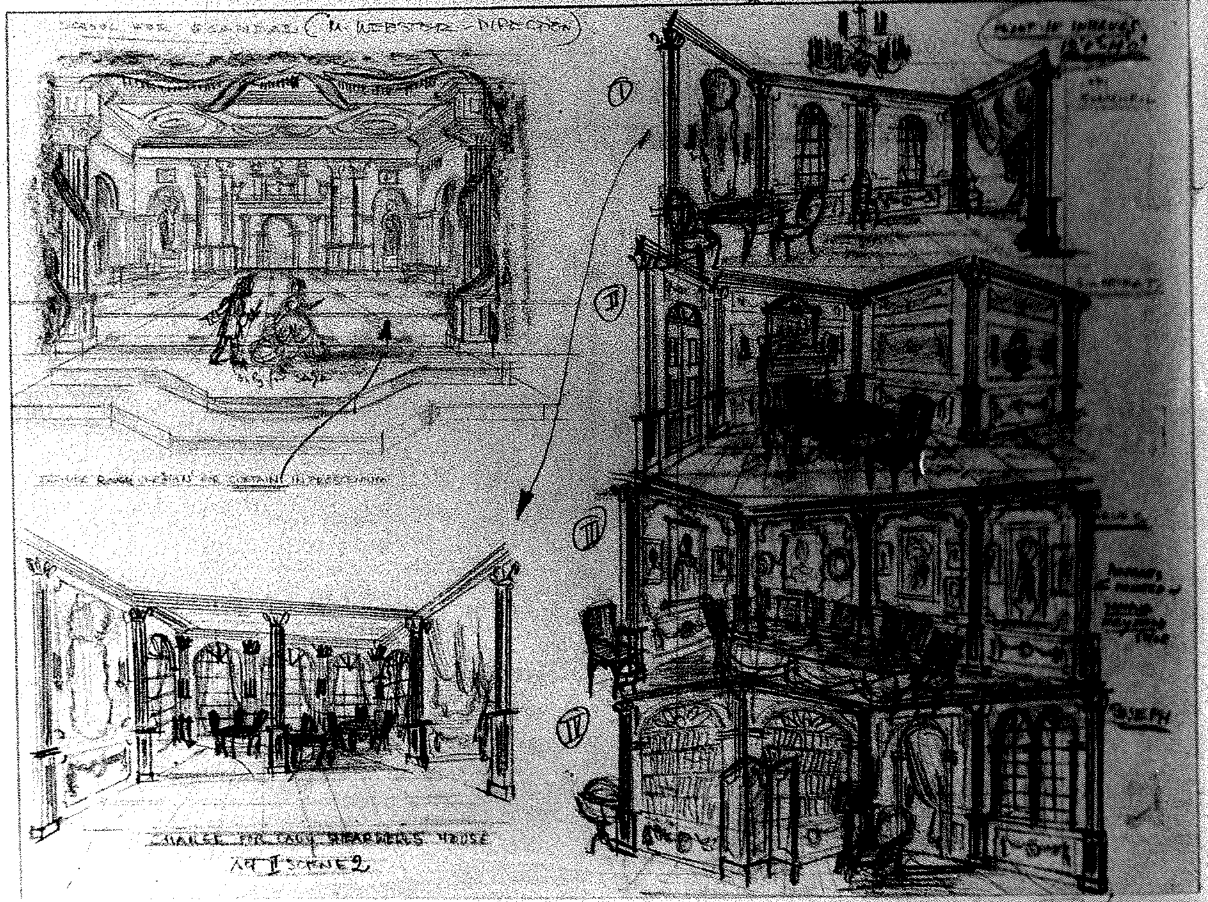

ACT II SCENE 2
1948-49

FIGURE 26

School for Wives

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1956, New York City Center

Photograph of original sketch

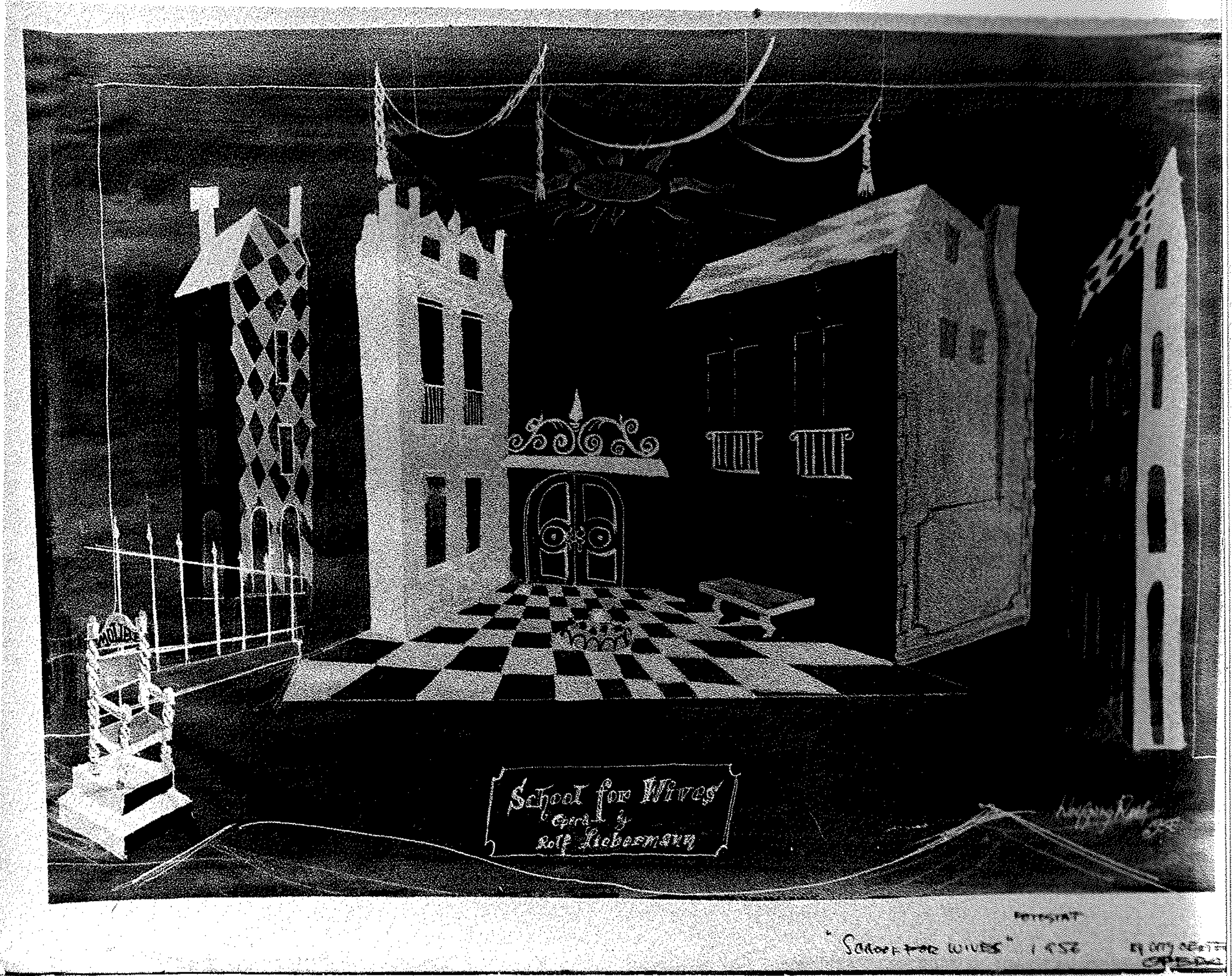

School for Wives
Opera by
Rolf Liebermann

FIGURE 27

School for Wives

Wolfgang Roth, designer

1956, New York City Center

Photograph of painting elevations

NOTE:
OPAQUE ALL
SCENERY!!

has a real third dimension and that the other pieces are only two-dimensional in structure, adding to the very obvious attempt to caricature a style of production from another period.

Another area of theatre for which Mr. Roth has designed is the ballet. Ballets are traditionally set against a simple system of backdrops and legs, leaving the whole stage area open for the choreographer's pattern. When Mr. Roth did the designs for a ballet entitled Billy Sunday, it was necessary to create two locales -- one in a barn at a square dance and the other in Hell. Mr. Roth designed skeletal rafters forming the framework of a barn which played against a dark background. Instead of leaving the stage area bare, he placed a step unit and two platform units in center stage. When the scene switched to Hell, all these structural pieces stayed on stage and only the background was replaced by a highly symbolic backdrop. From a photograph of Roth's original sketches on page 74 we get the impression that with a change of lighting the structural rafters of the barn receded into the background and the backdrop itself became the dominant scenic element.

During the years 1959, 1960 and 1961, Wolfgang Roth toured this country with a show called "The Littlest Circus." This show, created, produced and designed by Roth himself, was a musical pantomime designed for children but having a unique appeal for adults. Roth had practiced the art of mime in Europe and had performed as a clown in vaudeville and in circuses during his stay in Zurich. A publicity blurb for "The Littlest Circus" describes it like this:

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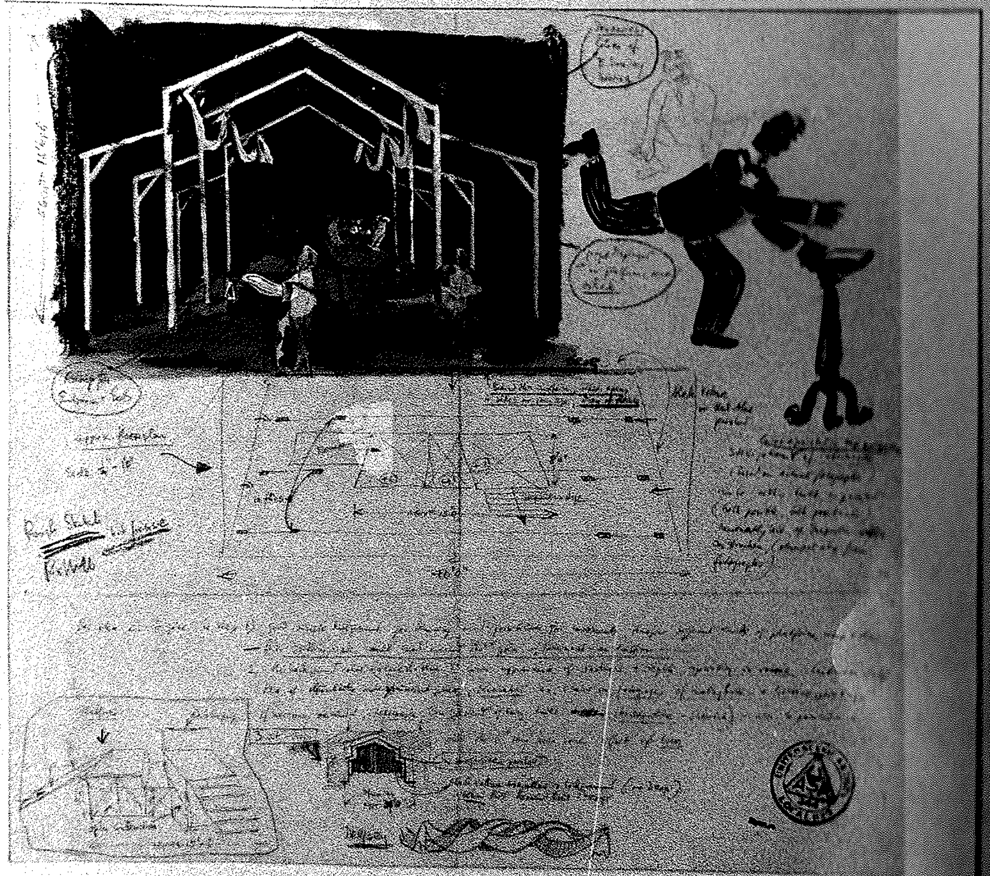
FIGURE 28

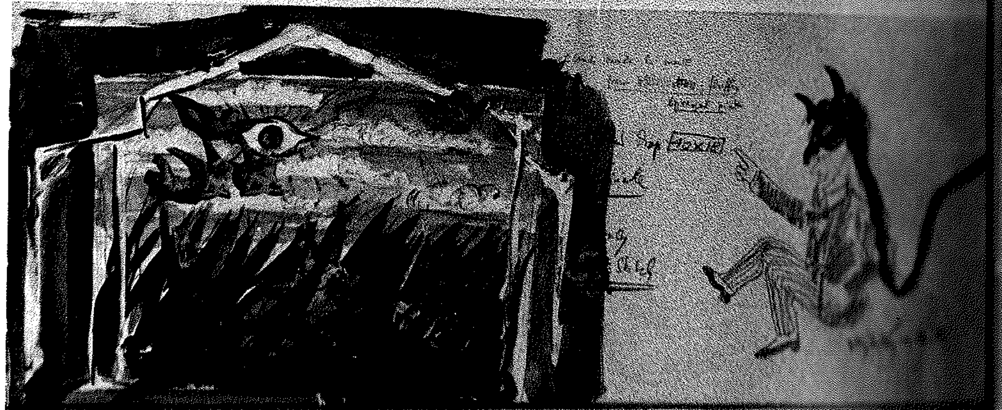
Billy Sunday

Wolfgang Roth, designer

A Ballet

Photograph of original sketches





Billy Sunday (A Ballet)

> "The Littlest Circus" is a miniature, magical pantomime for children of all ages created and designed by Wolfgang Roth and staged and choreographed by Nelle Fisher. It is in fact a dramatic-musical composition without a spoken word of dialogue; the story develops by acted and danced pantomime performed by a troupe of gifted professional actors. They tell the story of a European family and their little traveling circus wandering from town to town pulling their modest belongings in a little wagon, led by the father playing the one man band. Arriving, the family unpacks in front of the audience and the show begins. Since the family is too poor to support a large expensive group of performers and animals, they have decided to play all the parts themselves. During the course of the performance they will portray lions, jugglers, tightrope walkers, horses, acrobats, magicians, seals, giants and clowns.
>
> The program runs approximately seventy minutes without an intermission. The numbers are about three or four minutes in length. Each is introduced by the drawings of Puck the clown, which are presented to the children in the audience during the show. The performance is accompanied by a Hurdy-Gurdy calliope, and is colorfully designed and costumed.[2]

The show traveled quite extensively from California to New York and played in theatres and auditoriums of all kinds. The circus effect of the setting was achieved very simply by hanging colorful blankets around the back and down the sides of the stage. A minimum of lights were used and the whole thing had the effect of an improvisation. Eight actor-dancers made up the cast, and on occasion Mr. Roth performed with the company.

Prior to this tour Roth had in 1953 designed a project for a small traveling circus, and one gets the impression he already had his own show in mind when he planned this venture. While this project was never realized, we can see from the photographs on page 76 how easily "The Littlest Circus" could have been adapted to the facilities proposed in this design for a traveling circus. The

FIGURE 29

Project for a Traveling Circus

Wolfgang Roth, designer

Photograph of original sketch

Idea for a travelling circus (Cirque magique)

arrangement involved an out-of-doors performance with the audience and acting area enclosed by canvas painted to represent side-show poster of the Barnum-and-Bailey variety. The acting area was to consist of a platform stage extending from one side of the circular encloser, thus making a three-quarter round style of presentation. The whole arrangement embodied the atmosphere of the numerous tent shows that toured this country up until the Second World War and since then have almost totally passed out of existence.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Before I conclude this section I am briefly going to discuss the techniques Roth has used in rendering the sketches of his proposed costume and set designs. Mr. Roth has had easel paintings, collages and drawings shown in galleries and museums both in America and Europe, and many of his sketches of his designs are works of art in themselves.

Lee Simonson has discussed at length the use of preliminary sketches and models in his book, The Stage Is Set, and he speaks of the great translation that has to occur from the sketch to the finished product. Simonson says, "A scenic drawing is no more than an intention; it is no better than the methods eventually used to embody it. . . . Drawings for the theatre are desires. They should all be signed with a question mark, for they are, even the best of them, pretences until they are fulfilled."[3]

It is obvious from Simonson's statements that he put very little faith in sketches or models, and he himself rarely used either.

When we look at Mr. Roth's sketches of sets and costumes that he has designed we can see that he has made no attempts to be literal in any sense. His costume sketches are nearly always comic in effect and his set sketches do little more than give an impression of his intention.

When he designed Androcles and the Lion in 1946, the whole production was done in a caricature manner. His costume sketches, shown on pages 79 through 84, are done in this same caricature manner and have the appearance of being cartoons. From the photographs of the actual costumes inserted next to the drawings we can see that while they have become much more literal in their translation, they still embody the comic emphasis with which the show was produced. The striped and checkered leggings of the men, the loose and baggy pepli of the women and the "he-man" leopard-skins of the gladiators all add to the farcical nature of the play.

Mr. Roth often uses a collage technique in the rendering of his plans. The photographs of the sets for Don Giovanni shown on pages 43 through 46 show his use of collage and water color to mount his plans for that production. In this instance Mr. Roth has cut pieces from a sheet of plastic inlay to form the arches. The bold patterned pieces seen in these sketches are cut from wrapping paper. His costume sketches for the Met's production of The Girl of the Golden West and for those of an off-Broadway production of The Secret Concubine are all done with a collage technique. From the photographs on pages 85 through 87 we see that the collage was mounted on artificial wood paneling, suggesting the Western motif of the

FIGURE 30

<u>Androcles and the Lion</u>

Wolfgang Roth, designer

New York, 1948

Photograph of original costume sketches

FIGURE 31

Androcles and the Lion

Wolfgang Roth, designer *

New York, 1948

Photograph of original costume sketches

"CHRISTIANS" "ANDROCLES + THE LION"

FIGURE 32

Androcles and the Lion

Wolfgang Roth, designer

New York, 1948

Photograph of original costume sketches

CHRISTIAN

FIGURE 33

Androcles and the Lion

Wolfgang Roth, designer

New York, 1948

Photograph of original costume sketches

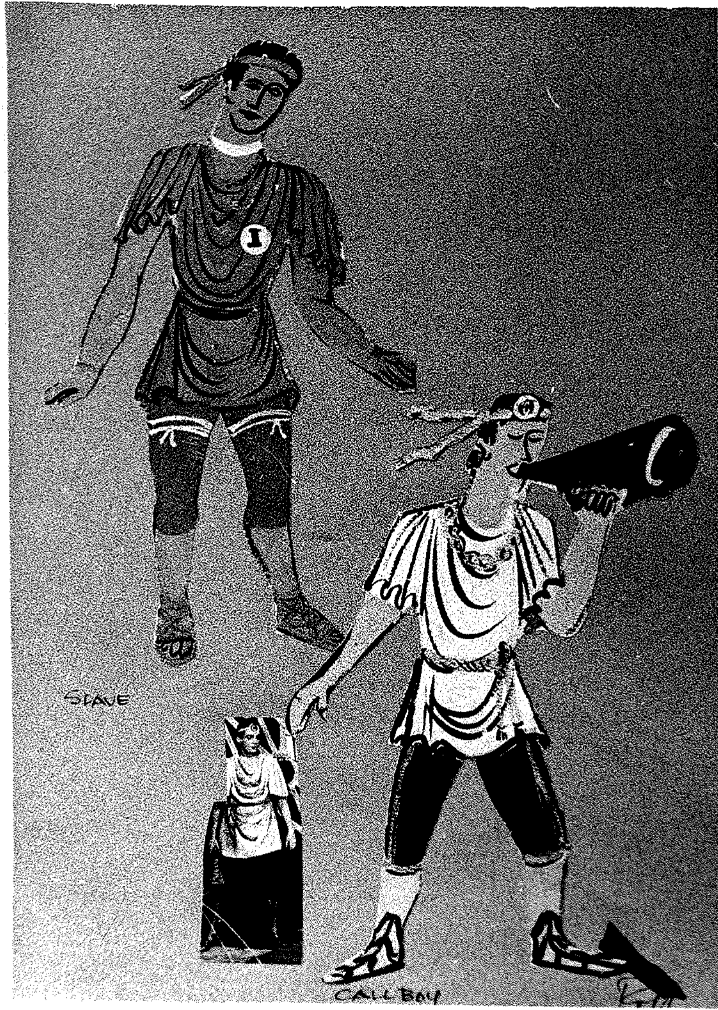

SLAVE
CALL BOY

FIGURE 34

Androcles and the Lion

Wolfgang Roth, designer

New York, 1948

Photograph of original costume sketches

FIGURE 35

<u>Androcles</u> <u>and</u> <u>the</u> <u>Lion</u>

Wolfgang Roth, designer

New York, 1948

Photograph of original costume sketches

FIGURE 36

Girl of the Golden West

Wolfgang Roth, designer

Metropolitan Opera Company

Photograph of original costume sketch

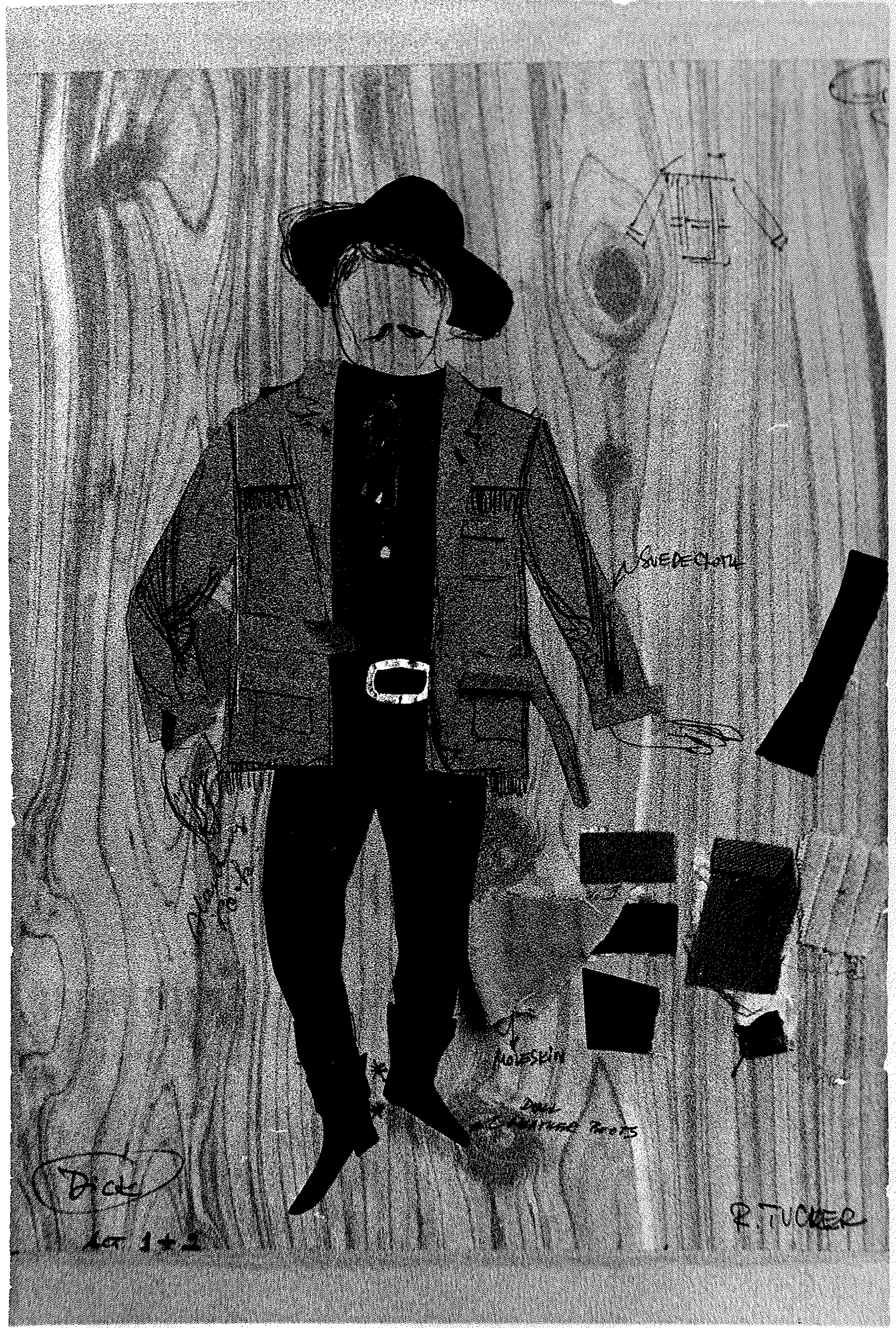

SUEDE CLOTH
MOLESKIN
Dick
ACT 1+2
R. TUCKER

FIGURE 37

Girl of the Golden West

Wolfgang Roth, designer

Metropolitan Opera Company

Photograph of original costume sketch

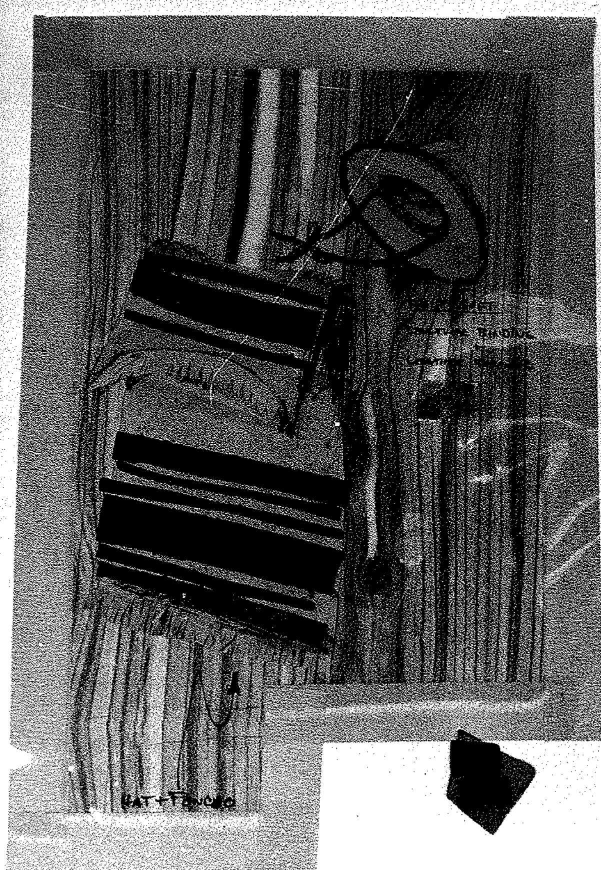
FIGURE 38

Girl of the Golden West

Wolfgang Roth, designer

Metropolitan Opera Company

Photograph of original costume sketch


HAT + PONCHO

opera. The clothing on the people in these designs is made entirely from construction paper with swatches of materials added to suggest textures and colors to be used in the translation of these plans into real costumes.

In his costume designs for <u>The Secret Concubine</u>, shown on pages 89 and 90, Roth used a variety of materials to compose his collages. Pieces of netting, burlap, tinfoil, Christmas paper and construction paper all go into making these stick figures which attempt to convey no literal idea as to what the final costume will be.

Mr. Roth's drawings reveal an artist of no little talent and great versatility. His use of water colors, oils, collage, pencil sketches and pastels all attest to the fact that he possesses the wide range of talent demanded of a man performing in his field.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

By looking at the photographs of these various sketches we can see that Wolfgang Roth has performed effectively in many diverse styles in all theatrical forms. His renderings show him to be a talented artist and his approaches show him capable of solving the numerous technical problems which confront a designer in today's theatre. Professional theatre has never given Mr. Roth the fame or recognition it has awarded to a few of his colleagues; nevertheless the critical praise he has received for his work, when judged by our most professional standards, attests to the calibre of his work.

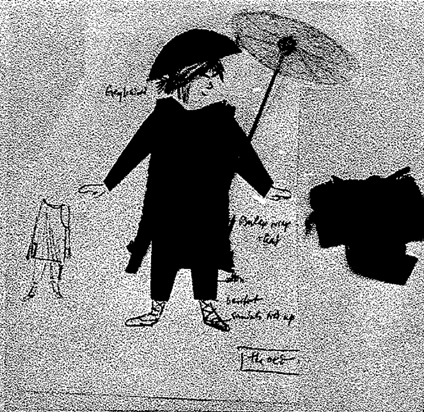
FIGURE 39

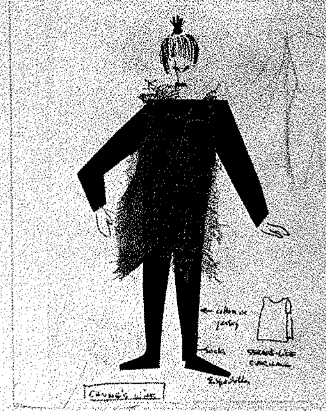
The Secret Concubine

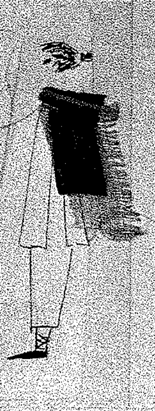
Wolfgang Roth, designer

A Chinese play: Off-Broadway production

Photograph of original costume sketches




CHUNG'S WIFE



CHUNG'S SON

FIGURE 40

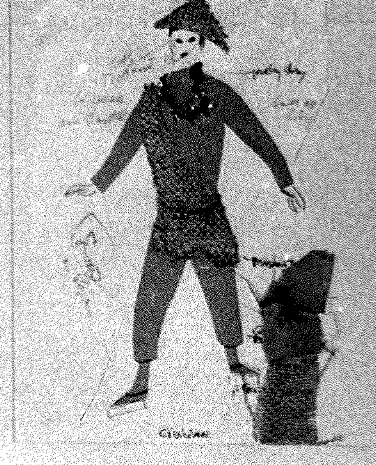
The Secret Concubine

Wolfgang Roth, designer

A Chinese play: Off-Broadway production

Photograph of original costume sketches

Empress



NOTES

1. Martin Esslin, Brecht: The Man and His Work, Anchor Books, Doubleday and Co., Inc. (Garden City, 1961), pp. 34-35.

2. This quotation is taken from an advertising brochure describing the production.

3. Lee Simonson, The Stage Is Set, Harcourt, Brace and Co., (New York, 1932), p. 310.

WOLFGANG ROTH AND THE NEW YORK CRITICS

The fact that I am devoting a section to the work done by Wolfgang Roth in the New York theatre does not imply that I think that success on Broadway or even off Broadway is the final test which determines whether or not the work of a designer or the work of any person employed in theatre is of any merit. Indeed, one factor in determining my selection of Wolfgang Roth as a representative designer in contemporary theatre was the fact that he did not work exclusively on Broadway. However, it would be rather foolish to deny that the New York stage is the hub of theatrical activity in this country and that the productions done there serve as a goal for other producing groups. That is to say that the New York theatre has at its disposal the best talent in all areas of production. It seems to me, then, that by looking at Roth's work in this highly competitive New York theatre we can get an idea as to how successful

he has been when reviewed in the light of our most professional standards.

The success of any design for the New York stage becomes a very difficult thing to determine. I feel it is unfair to equate the success or failure of a scene design with the success or failure of a show. There are many varied standards by which a New York production can be termed a success or a failure. The critics usually take care of establishing the artistic merits of a production, but critical approval does not necessarily ensure a successful show. The New York theatre is primarily a commercial enterprise, and from a practical point of view a show produced there can hardly be called a success unless it produces black figures for its producers. Tyrone Guthrie's 1956 production of Leonard Bernstein's operetta, Candide, is a prime example of a production that received artistic applause and yet failed to be a success, in that it drew very little at the box office. On the other hand, the 1933 production of Tobacco Road is perhaps the outstanding example of a show which, in spite of its panning at the hands of the critics, managed to survive and run nearly three thousand performances. It might be concluded from the preceding statements that there are two forms of success on Broadway: artistic and financial. The two do not necessarily go hand in hand, and on occasion may have no relation to each other.

Most assuredly it would be unfair to judge the achievement of any designer by the length of run or financial success of any show. By such a standard Cecil Beaton's settings and costumes for Saratoga

(which met with lavish approval from the critics) would be a complete failure, for the show lasted but a few weeks.

We can get some ideas as to the relative merits of a particular design from looking at the critics' statements concerning the artistic merits of a show. Even then, however, we can't be assured that because a critic approves or disapproves of a show his statements have any reference to its setting. Only when a critic makes a specific reference to the setting can we get an ideas as to the success of a design; yet, if a critic makes no mention of the set, it is not necessarily a condemnation of the setting, for if it is true that a setting must remain unobtrusive and not distract our attention after its initial appearance, the absence of mention may indicate that the set adequately suited the action and remained within its proportion to the show.

Wolfgang Roth's first designs for a Broadway commercial show were done for a production of The First Million, by Irving Elman, which opened at the Ritz Theatre on April 28, 1943. Apparently the only consistent thing about this play were its notices. They were consistently unfavorable. Perhaps the most exciting thing about the show, the thing which made most reviewers take notice, was the fact that its producer was only nineteen years old. Burton Rascoe, writing for the New York World-Telegram, gave this notice:

> Much has been made of the fact that the producer, Jimmy Elliott, is only 19 years old. He is currently playing the role of the messenger boy in Junior Miss. He made his debut at the age of 12 in Sidney Kingsley's Dead End and has since played

> in five other Broadway productions and in stock. This information in the program indicates that his life has been in and of the theater.
>
> He can therefore be excused on the grounds that he hasn't had time to learn much about what's outside the theater. But it is odd that someone connected with the show business didn't tell him that the substance of The First Million was pretty seedy as funny stuff when Artemus Ward got through it as a "leckshure" over eighty years ago, and they stopped using it in melodrama when electric lights came in.[1]

The First Million was essentially a hillbilly play, not unlike those often produced in small town high-schools. The fact that it was given a professional production awed most of the critics. Lewis Nichols could find no other explanation for the production, so he resorted to the weather: "The Spring, or silly season in the theater opened last evening. . .the play is quite bad. . . . Just call it Spring on Forty-eighth Street."[2] John Anderson of the New York Journal-American put it very succinctly when he said: ". . .it is merely pathetic."[3]

In the midst of such devastating reviews, where does the poor scene designer stand? In this particular instance, if it hadn't been for Burton Rascoe, we would have to assume that Wolfgang Roth's hillbilly mountain cabin set was only adequate. But Mr. Rascoe adds this notation to his review: "The only thing I can commend concerning The First Million is the setting of Wolfgang Roth; it is very good."[4]

Here we see the plight of a scenic designer in the highly commercial and competitive New York theatre. We can conclude that Mr. Roth did very fine work in designing a setting for this obviously

very bad play. Yet because of the play's failure, he received no real recognition. Since the play closed after five performances it can be assumed that very few people saw his work. The scenic designer's success, like that of any of the other various artists of the theatre, is often dependent upon the success of the whole. However, actors and even directors may and often do overcome and stand above a bad script. So too, a scenic designer of any talent may often rise above a bad production. This is what Mr. Roth accomplished in his first New York venture.

It is obvious that Mr. Roth was not plagued with offers to do other Broadway shows, for it wasn't until two years later that he again appeared on the New York scene, this time with a play called Too Hot For Maneuvers, which opened at the Broadhurst on May 2, 1945. Again Mr. Roth was associated with James ("Jimmie") Elliott, the boy producer, and again the show was a dismal failure. This was 1945 and the country was still at war, so Mr. Elliott chose a war theme. Well, not really! The play was a trite situation comedy about soldiers getting mixed up with a beauty salon which was mistaken for a brothel. The critics unanimously agreed that they had had enough of nineteen-year-old producers and their miserable shows, so they were most generous with their abuse. The reviews were so damning that it is to Mr. Roth's credit that he was not even mentioned. Here again I must repeat that the unfavorable reviews have no real reflection on the quality of the design. Since no critic makes mention of the setting, we must assume that Mr. Roth's sets were adequate and did not contribute to the downfall of the show.

It wasn't until December of 1946 that any great plaudits were heaped upon Wolfgang Roth. Then, in association with Margaret Webster and the American Repertory Theatre, he designed sets and costumes for Sean O'Casey's Pound on Demand and Shaw's Androcles and the Lion, which played as a double bill. Pound on Demand was given some mild praise as a curtain-raiser, but Androcles and the Lion was highly praised by all critics. Margaret Webster's approach to Shaw's script was light, comic and airy: "The new production is lively and diverting. It treads lightly on the grimmer aspects of its subject, insisting on Shaw the jester rather than Shaw the prophet. . . . The direction in Margaret Webster's competent hands also leans heavily on the slapstick and horse play for the more farcical passages."[5] It is obvious from reviewers' comments that Miss Webster and Mr. Roth were in complete agreement as to what form the production should take, for the same farcical and slapstick qualities mentioned concerning the direction are repeated when references to the sets are made.

The reviewer quoted above has this to say concerning Mr. Roth's sets: "Wolfgang Roth has designed a striking expressionistic set made up of slightly cockeyed Roman motifs in white against bright colored backdrops--the effect is light and brittle, sketched with deliberate humor."[6] John Chapman of the New York Daily News said: "Wolfgang Roth's settings were perfect, having more humor than any other I have seen all season."[7] Richard Watts, Jr., wrote: "Wolfgang Roth's sets added to the charade-like quality of the evening."[8] Howard Barnes of the New York Herald-Tribune wrote: "Wolfgang Roth

deserves a big hand for his sets and costumes."[9] Robert Garland of the New York Journal-American noted: "The designs by Wolfgang Roth were light, right and impressive."[10] Brooks Atkinson reviewed: "Abandoning the worn concepts of decoration, Wolfgang Roth has designed a lean, jaunty, yet colorful production, almost if not quite so light and pointed as Shaw's barbed phrases."[11] William Hawkins wrote in the New York World-Telegram: "The physical production of Wolfgang Roth is at once heady and effervescent."[12]

After this very successful venture with Androcles and the Lion Mr. Roth continued his association with The American Repertory Theatre and Margaret Webster. In February of the following year (1947) The American Repertory Theatre staged a revival of Sidney Howard's Yellow Jack for which Mr. Roth did the scenic designs. This being a completely different type of play, Mr. Roth used quite a different approach. Whereas in Androcles and the Lion his sets not only suited the action of the play but also contributed greatly to its humor, in Yellow Jack Mr. Roth chose to build his sets around the almost documentary quality of the play. This is not to imply that he took a naturalistic approach, for in fact he did quite the opposite. Brooks Atkinson comments on the nature of the production: "The theatre has become less rigid in style and has had the stimulus of Living Newspaper technique. Although the current performance is no parody of the Living Newspaper, it has some of the same terseness and directness in its narrative statement."[13] Ward Morehouse of the New York Sun had this to say about the production: "In the present staging its oratorical effect is heightened and it frequently has a

FIGURE 41

Androcles and the Lion

Wolfgang Roth, designer

New York, 1948

Photograph of original sketch

Prologue: A Jungle Path

FIGURE 42

<u>Androcles and the Lion</u>

Wolfgang Roth, designer

New York, 1948

Photograph of original sketch

Act I: The Road to Rome

FIGURE 43

Androcles and the Lion

Wolfgang Roth, designer

New York, 1948

Photograph of original sketch

Act II: Behind the Emperor's Box at the Colosseum

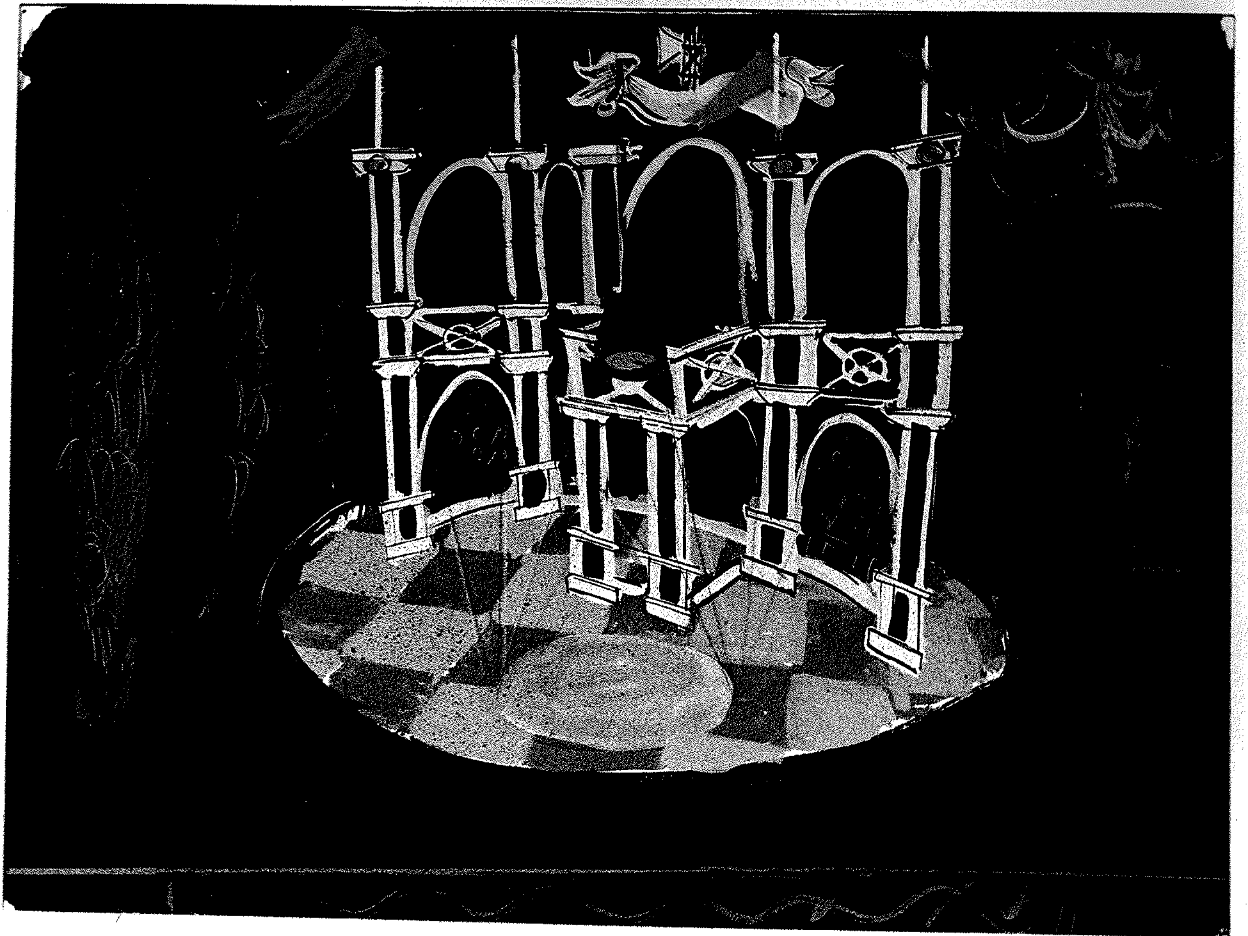


FIGURE 44

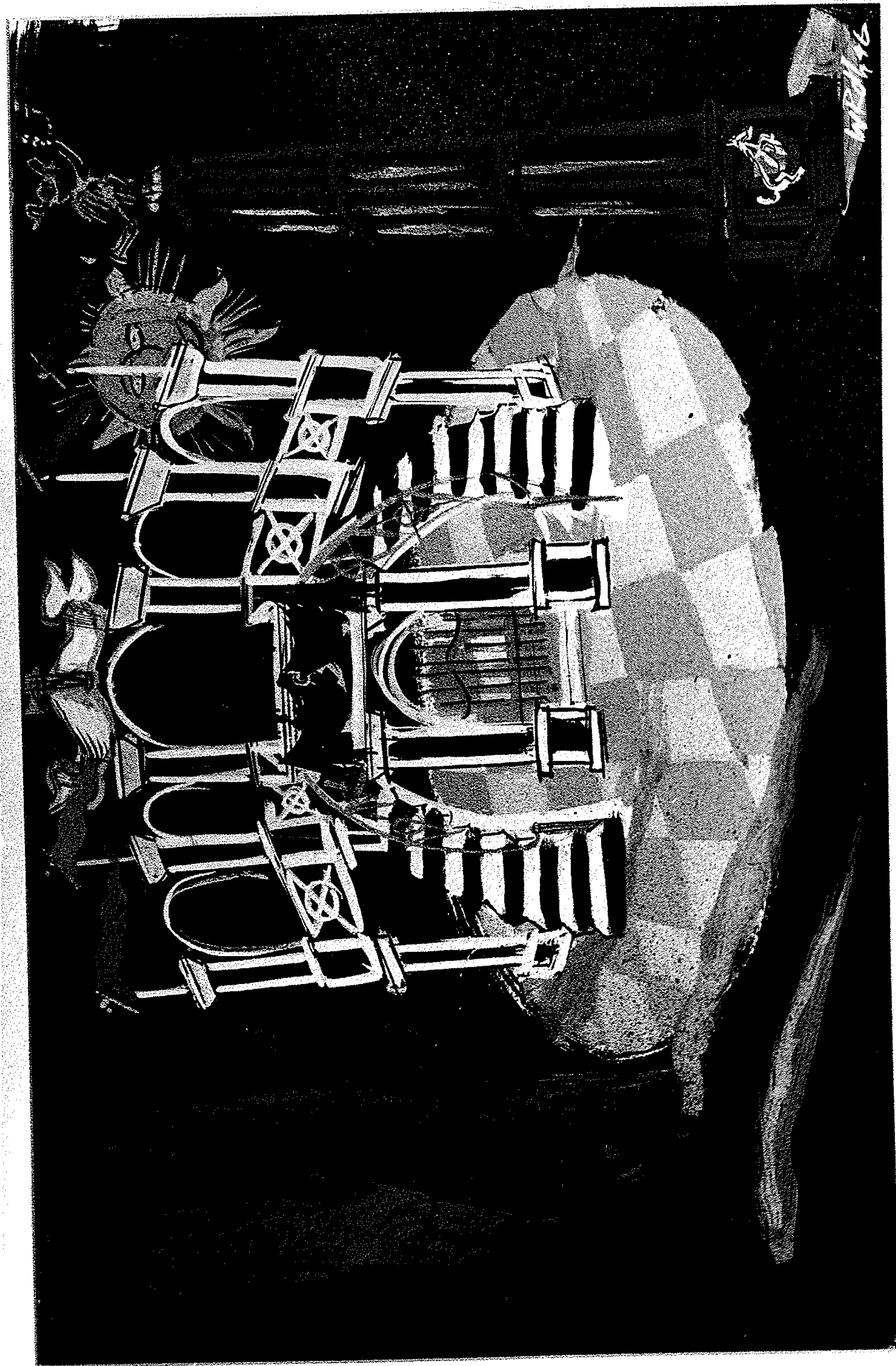
Androcles and the Lion

Wolfgang Roth, designer

New York, 1948

Photograph of original sketch

Act II: Inside the Colosseum



tendency to become a clinical report."[14]

Taking his clues from the mechanical or clinical qualities of the play, Mr. Roth designed suggestive scenery set against various backdrops. This allowed for a rapid movement from scene to scene and helped to overcome the episodic nature of the script. Concerning the settings, Brooks Atkinson stated: "Wolfgang Roth has designed a functional setting that has the happy effect of throwing the emphasis on the acting without being precious in its conception or rendering."[15] William Hawkins of the New York World-Telegram reviewed: "The production is done with utmost simplicity. There is the raised laboratory like a high throne in the center of the stage. Scenes elsewhere are played on various levels with a minimum of setting. Spotlights direct the attention and the show moves with alacrity."[16]

In both these shows designed for American Repertory Theatre, there seemed to be a close mixture of ideas between designer and director as to what the concept of the production should be. As a result both shows were well received and the designer, while working with two distinctly different approaches, was successful with both. In the one, Androcles and the Lion, he took an active part in contributing to the humor of the production, while in the other, Yellow Jack, he remained more passive and provided a setting which does not necessarily make any statement in itself, but serves very successfully to contain the broad, episodic action of the play.

While Mr. Roth continued his association with Margaret Webster by doing the settings for her touring Shakespeare Company when she

toured Hamlet and Macbeth in 1947 and 1948, Yellow Jack was his last set for The American Repertory Theatre.

Mr. Roth's work was seen on Broadway the next season when he became associated with the John Yorke production of Oh! Mr. Meadowbrook, which opened at the John Golden Theatre on December 26, 1948. This situation comedy starring Ernest Truex and Vicki Cummings proved to be a complete flop. Here again, as was the case with The First Million, Mr. Roth seemed to fare much better than did the play as a whole. Four out of the eight New York critics gave at least some notice to his work. A review in the New York Times stated: "Wolfgang Roth's Connecticut living room is cheerfully spring-like and a reminder that current temperatures are only transitory."[17] Robert Coleman in the New York Daily Mirror mildly mentioned: ". . .a pleasant setting by Wolfgang Roth."[18] The New York World-Telegram, while giving no great praise, did state that: "The one set designed and executed by Wolfgang Roth was adequate."[19]

The year 1950 was perhaps Wolfgang Roth's busiest season on Broadway. In March of that year he did the settings for an elaborate production of Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep, a play by Elaine Ryan adapted from a story by Ludwig Bemelmans, directed by Hume Cronyn and starring Frederick March, Florence Eldridge and Charles Chaplin, Jr.

The play required eight complete sets, both interiors and exteriors, and was set in many different locales from Biarritz to Ecuador. This time Mr. Roth took his cue from Bemelmans' own drawings and reproduced his designs in the childlike caricatures

Bemelmans created for his own books. The play, in spite of its impressive array of stars, did not fare too well at the hands of the critics and lasted only a short time. Mr. Roth's sets, however, were given special notice by the critics and were declared to be the best single element in the production. Theatre Arts Magazine stated: ". . .for the madcap spirit of caricature, the sets are the most consistently helpful element."[20] Howard Barnes said: ". . .brilliant settings which you would swear were done by Bemelmans himself."[21] Robert Coleman wrote: "One of the production's virtues is the Bemelmans-like setting by Wolfgang Roth."[22] While he made no mention of the effectiveness of the scenery, Brooks Atkinson stated: "Wolfgang Roth has designed enough scenery for a full-gauge musical show."[23] It is almost needless to repeat that here again Mr. Roth's work seems to have been much more successful than any other element of the production.

The same story was repeated to a lesser degree in November of that year, when Mr. Roth designed the setting for Tower Beyond Tragedy, a play by Robinson Jeffers based on the Orestes trilogy of Aeschylus and starring Judith Anderson. This production was not of the elaborate nature of Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep and required but one setting, that of a palace entrance. The play was done in the style of Robinson Jeffers' earlier success, Medea, and the Greek-like classical tone was carried through in Mr. Roth's set. One critic, Robert Coleman, called the sets gaudy,[24] but Brooks Atkinson and John Chapman thought the sets were of great merit. Atkinson wrote: "Wolfgang Roth's simple set of a palace entrance

FIGURE 45

Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep

Wolfgang Roth, designer

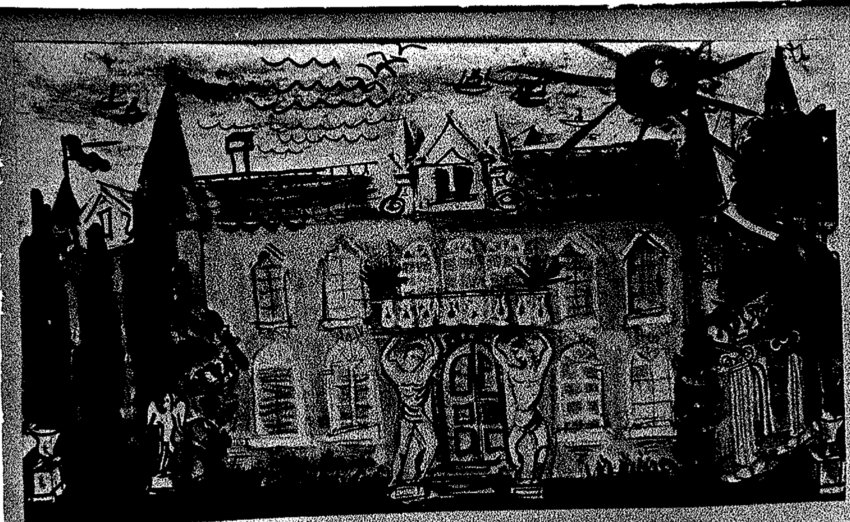
New York, 1949

Photographs of original sketches as labelled

*

NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP

GEORGE NICHOLS – NANCY STERN PRODUCTION 1949



BIARRITZ VILLA

GENERAL'S ROOM

MISS GRAVES ROOM

FIGURE 46

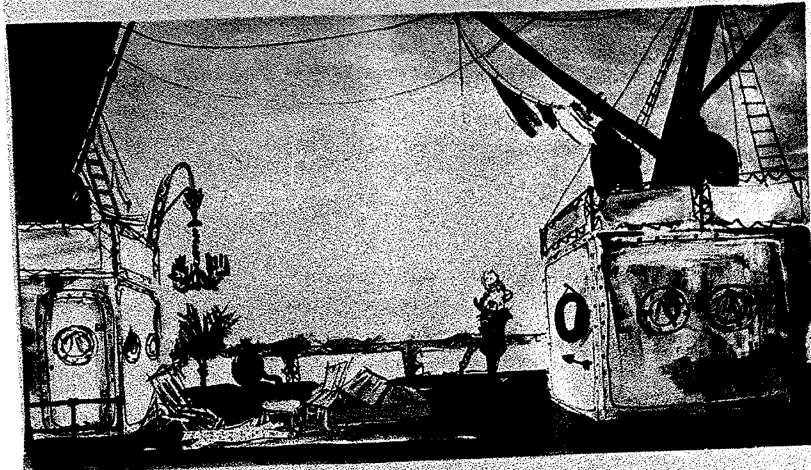
Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep

Wolfgang Roth, designer

New York, 1949

Photographs of original sketches as labelled

DECK AT BIARRITZ



ON BOARD SHIP

NIGHT ON SHIP

NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP

FIGURE 47

<u>Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep</u>

Wolfgang Roth, designer

New York, 1949

Photographs of original sketches as labelled

ECUADOR JUNGLE

ARRIVAL IN ECUADOR

GENERALS GOLD CAVE

GENERALS VILLA IN ECUADOR

NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP

gave the production a meaningful appearance."[25] Chapman mentioned ". . .Wolfgang Roth's beautiful and simple setting."[26]

In December of 1950 Mr. Roth did the setting for a revival of Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's Twentieth Century, directed by José Ferrer and starring Gloria Swanson and Mr. Ferrer. The setting for this show called for the interior of a railroad car. This revival was labelled a success by critics, as was Mr. Roth's setting. Miss Swanson and Mr. Ferrer, of course, got first mention in reviews, but Mr. Roth's sets did not go unnoticed. Following are some of the notices concerning the setting: "Wolfgang Roth's interior of a Pullman car contained the action perfectly."[27] "Wolfgang Roth, scene designer, has made something gay out of the interior of a railroad car."[28] "Wolfgang Roth has designed a pair of drawing rooms and a lounge which are very comfortable for traveling."[29]

One critic, John McClain, did not disapprove of the setting, but was disturbed by some of the technical manipulations. "The setting is certainly adequate, but I was disconcerted by the fact that occasionally actors were left sitting in the dark while the main action went on a few feet away, in the lit-up part of the stage."[30]

In summing up Mr. Roth's work on Broadway for 1950, we must conclude that he proved successful in providing settings for three completely different styles of production. The first was lavish, expansive and in caricature. The second called for a classical, tragic simplicity, and the third a warm, realistic presentation of the interior of a Pullman car. The fact that he met with critical

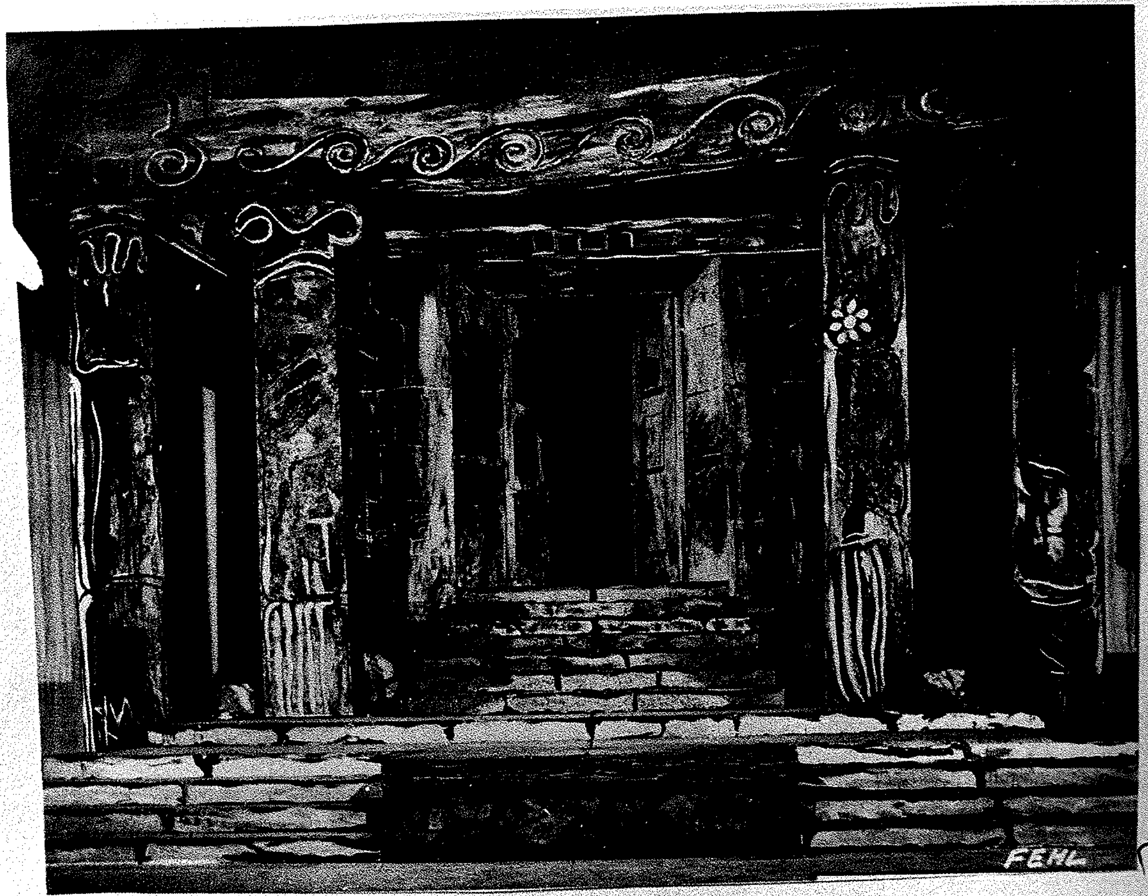
FIGURE 48

Tower Beyond Tragedy

Wolfgang Roth, designer

New York, 1949

Photograph of original sketch


FEHL

approval for all these shows would indicate that Mr. Roth is not lacking in the versatility which is demanded of a contemporary designer, who must work in a theatre where no particular style of production is in vogue.

It wasn't until March in 1953 that more of Mr. Roth's work was seen on Broadway. This time it was the now famous production of _Porgy and Bess_ whose settings Mr. Roth designed, the production which became the international company that toured Russia and Europe, receiving international acclaim. Critics, of course, harkened back to the first production of the opera eighteen years earlier, and it seems that this 1953 production far surpassed what they had witnessed in 1935. Soudeikine's setting for the 1935 production has become as famous as Norman Bel Geddes' setting for _Dead End_ or Jo Mielziner's for _Street Scene_ as an example of stage realism. It is to Mr. Roth's credit that he in no way tried to duplicate the earlier, quite famous setting.

The theatre of the 1930's was largely dominated by naturalistic movements which gave birth to such interesting developments as the Living Newspapers and the numerous political or protest theatres. It is therefore fitting to assume that a production of _Porgy and Bess_ in that period would reflect naturalistic tendencies.

The theatre of 1953 had become much more varied in its styles of production and audiences had been educated out of their love for pictorial realism. Thus Mr. Roth took quite a different approach to Catfish Row. Brooks Atkinson stated the differences very nicely when he wrote: "Instead of being squalid, Catfish Row now has some

of the beauty of an entrancing gouache in Wolfgang Roth's excellent setting. What it loses in realism it gains in warmth."[31]

One other element that this critic took general notice of was the fact that the show moved from scene to scene much more rapidly than the earlier production had. Much of this, of course, can be attributed to the more flexible staging given the show by its producers, but Mr. Roth's almost simultaneous setting added greatly to the alacrity of the production. Robert Coleman put it this way: "Wolfgang Roth's sets are towering and atmospheric. They eliminate lulls and permit the music drama to flow."[32] John Chapman noted: "Scenically this production is different from others. Almost all the action now takes place in the one set of Catfish Row, a very good set designed by Wolfgang Roth."[33] John McClain added this comment: "To serve as a setting Wolfgang Roth has devised an ingenious set with more windows and doors than Stuyvesant Village."[34]

This set by Mr. Roth is probably his best known, not because it is really any better than some others he has created, but merely because this particular production of Porgy and Bess has received great recognition because of its international tours. This only serves to emphasize the interdependency of the various theatre arts, as well as the peculiar second-level position of a scenic designer.

Wolfgang Roth's next effort for the New York theatre consisted of the setting he devised for the Phoenix Theatre production of Bertolt Brecht's The Good Woman of Setzuan in 1956. The task of creating a setting which will contain the action for Brecht's "epic theatre" is no easy task, and the problem of stage arrangement

FIGURE 49

Porgy and Bess

Wolfgang Roth, designer

International Touring Company

Photograph of original sketch

and production photographs

FIGURE 50

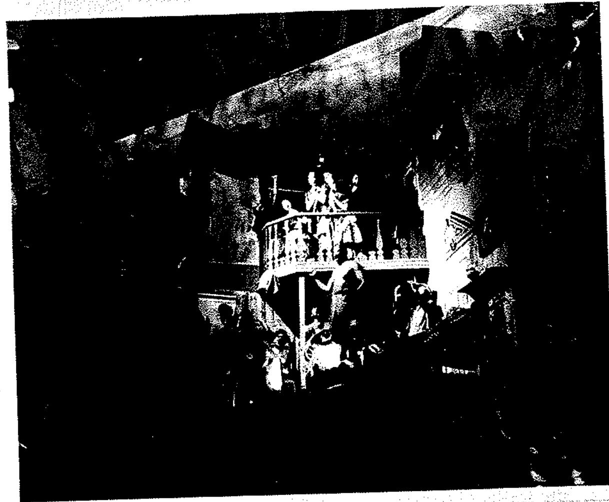
Porgy _and_ _Bess_

Wolfgang Roth, designer

International Touring Company

Production photographs as labelled

CATFISH ROW



HURRICANE

KITTIWAH ISLAND

becomes more important than that of creating any stage illusion, for Brecht's theatre exists on the premise that illusion destroys real truth. Mr. Roth had worked directly with Brecht in Zurich in 1936 and 1937, after they both had fled from Nazi Germany. In this instance, however, he was working with Mr. Eric Bentley, who has found in Bertolt Brecht a savior to carry contemporary theatre out of the dregs to which he thinks it has sunk. Mr. Bentley's production proved to be a big bore and critics were most vehement in their disapproval. While they admitted that they were puzzled by the production, they nevertheless felt that Mr. Bentley must have mutilated Brecht.

Tom Donnelly, writing for the New York World-Telegram, closed his review with this brief paragraph: "It is possible that Mr. Bentley is not Brecht's best friend, but his well-intentioned enemy."[35] Regardless of whether or not Bentley mutilated Brecht, Wolfgang Roth's stage arrangement seemed to be the only thing that the critics found pleasing. The play has a Chinese locale, and so Mr. Roth used bamboo and screens to decorate areas of the stage in a very simple manner. John McClain wrote: "Speaking of sets, the ones by Wolfgang Roth are of the greatest simplicity and good taste, allowing the proceedings to move rapidly by the simple raising and lowering of curtains and slides."[36] Richard Watts, Jr., called the arrangement "pictorially effective."[37] Walter Kerr thought that the arrangement was nice, but that the whole approach was pretentious: "The machinery is unveiled--the sliding curtains, the elevated orchestra, the abrupt transitions. . . .it all seems a slightly sad echo of every

constructivist theory advanced since 1922."[37]

Perhaps Brooks Atkinson's statements, like those of John McClain quoted above, are the most just when we consider the role of a designer in an "epic theatre" production. "Using bamboo poles and screens, Wolfgang Roth has designed a first-rate setting that breaks with conventions and keeps pace with the fluidity of the story-telling."[38]

"Story-telling" is perhaps a key word for a designer to keep in mind when working in "epic theatre." Since he must do nothing to create an illusion (indeed, he must invent things to aid in destroying any illusion) one of his chief tasks must be to see that the stage is arranged in such a way that the story can be told with all clarity and fluidity.

Mr. Roth's only full-fledged musical for Broadway (not considering _Porgy and Bess_) was produced in February of 1958 at the Adelphi Theatre. It was called _Portofino_. Perhaps that is all that should be said about this production. Its reception was rather cool and can best be summed up by Walter Kerr's final remarks: "I will not say that _Portofino_ is the worst musical _ever_ produced, because I've only been seeing musicals since 1919."[39] Only two reviewers took notice of the set and they seem to cancel out each other. Robert Coleman stated: "The usually reliable Wolfgang Roth has come up with settings off his lower shelf."[40] John Chapman, on the other hand, thought: "Wolfgang Roth's single setting is attractive."[41]

While these two notices do not help to raise the prestige of

any designer, they do reveal two interesting things about Mr. Roth and about this production. Mr. Coleman refers to "the usually reliable Wolfgang Roth." I was quite surprised that any reviewer who meets the vast number of productions that any New York critic does would remember the quality of the work done by a man like Mr. Roth, whose appearances on Broadway are irregular and widely spaced. It is, in effect, a compliment to Mr. Roth to be so noticed and remembered after such a comparatively small amount of work.

The other point of interest was John Chapman's reference to a "single setting." Until recently, it was common practice that Broadway musicals have many sets. However, last season's Carnival and the more recent No Strings are both centered around one locale. By creating a one-set musical in 1958, Mr. Roth may have anticipated a growing trend in the production of musical comedies.

Two years after the fiasco of Portofino Wolfgang Roth did the set for The Deadly Game, a play by James Yaffe based on a novel by Friedrich Dürrenmatt. This play was generally approved by the critics. They, of course, made unfair comparisons to Dürrenmatt's The Visit and found The Deadly Game wanting. Those critics who took notice of Mr. Roth's setting voiced approval. The play, in spite of its good reception, could only last out a month at the box office.

The present New York season, 1961/62, finds Mr. Roth once more in association with a Brecht play. The production is not really a play, but selected cuttings from Brecht's works knit together into

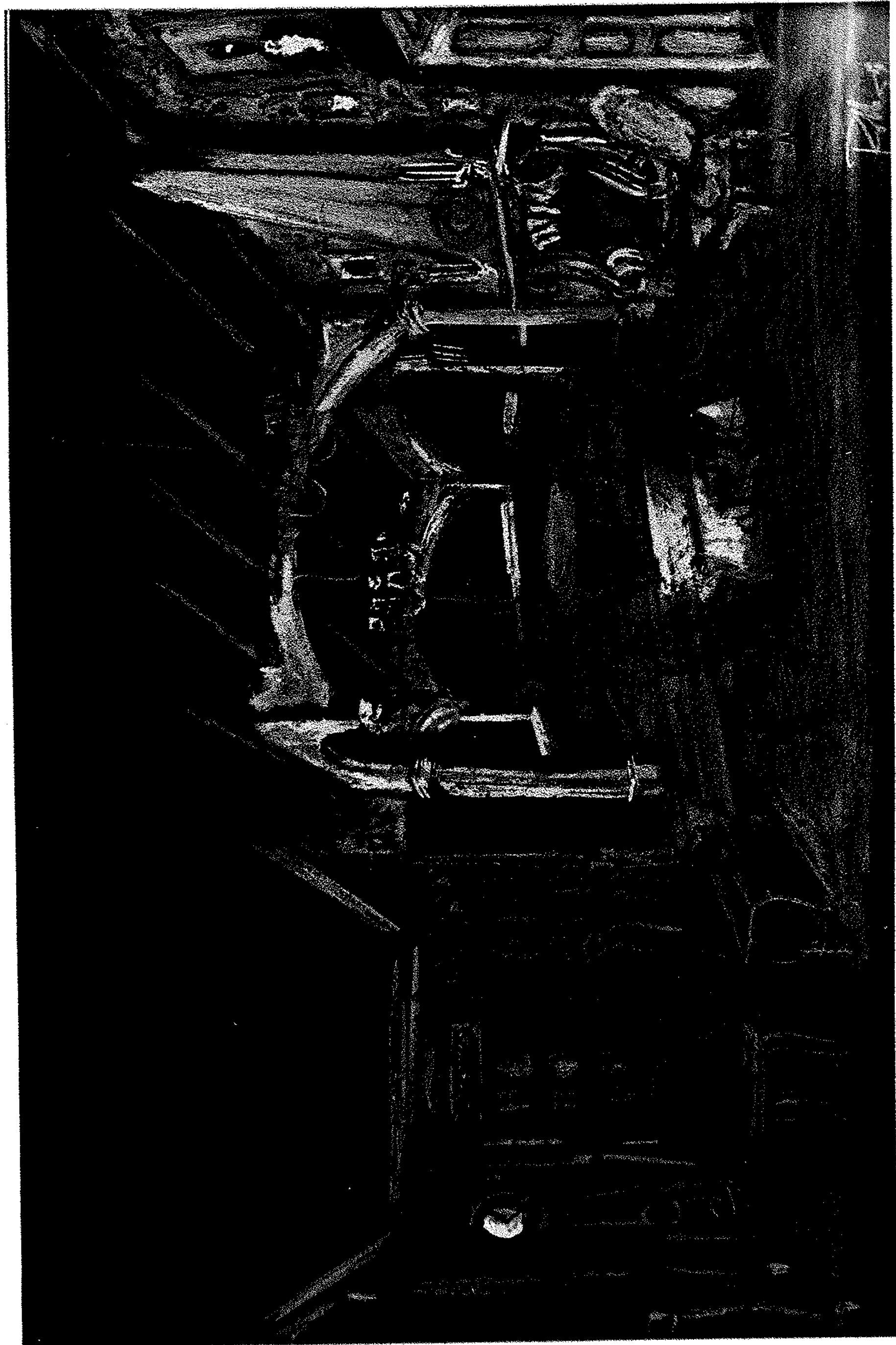
FIGURE 51

The Deadly Game

Wolfgang Roth, designer

New York, 1960

Photograph of original sketch



a production called Brecht on Brecht. The production might more correctly be called a staged reading calculated to present Bertolt Brecht the man to his many followers. If it is true that designing for an "epic theatre" production is more a matter of arranging and coördinating than designing, it is even more true of this presentation, which is totally lacking in any illusionary devices. The show is almost totally presentational in form. The dominant feature in Roth's stage arrangement is a large photograph of Brecht; all else is sheer mechanics, to the point of letting the technicians and operators remain visible. Alan Schneider, writing in The New Leader, gives a very complete description of Mr. Roth's stage arrangement:

> The production effectively--and for Brecht characteristically--combines bareness with high theatricality. There is no curtain. On stage are six plain, high stools arranged in a simple but interesting pattern; a bench and a few props are added later. Overhead are a series of hand-lettered signs, like vaudeville signboards, worked by a stage manager in full view of the audience. Upstage right, also in full view, there is a tape-recorder console and someone to work it. Upstage left, and dominating the stage is a huge photograph of Brecht, cigar in hand and gazing at the audience with quizzical detachment, his special pride and trademark.
>
> My only quarrel with Wolfgang Roth's "non-setting" is that it is too deliberately an imitation of Brechtian visual design, too antiseptic. The floor should have been dirtier, the stools not quite so new. Brecht used to say that real beauty came only through use.[42]

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I have not included in the foregoing pages the New York work done by Mr. Roth in the off-Broadway houses. Critics until recently

have not taken such attentive notice of the work done in these theatres, and there is very little documentation as to the quality of these productions. A list of these productions follows:

ANTA Experimental Theatre

The Wanhope Building
Cock-a-doodle-doo
Here Comes the Clown

Off-Broadway

Johnny Johnson (Stella Adler production)
The Riverline (Stuart Vaughn production)
The Secret Concubine
The Littlest Circus (Wolfgang Roth production)

Wolfgang Roth's career in New York, while it has been quite limited, has been, I think we must conclude, quite rewarding artistically. His work has never received any severe criticism and has often been praised. The fact that he is not one of our most often seen designers seems to be more a matter of finances than of artistic merit. Howard Bay has said that designers have their vogue, coming into and falling from public notice with no apparent reason.[43] Mr. Roth will never have his day, but nevertheless the fact that he has worked quite regularly on Broadway, has given us the opportunity to look at his work in the light of our most professional and competitive standards.

NOTES

(All newspaper articles referred to below are Theatre Reviews, and all the newspapers referred to are New York City newspapers.)

1. Burton Rascoe, The World-Telegram, April 29, 1943.
2. Lewis Nichols, The Times, April 29, 1943.
3. John Anderson, The Journal-American, April 29, 1943.
4. Rascoe, op. cit.
5. Rosamond Gilder, Theatre Arts, Vol. 31 (February, 1947), pp. 8-18.
6. Ibid.
7. John Chapman, The Daily News, December 20, 1946.
8. Richard Watts, The Post, December 20, 1946.
9. Howard Barnes, The Herald-Tribune, December 20, 1946.
10. Robert Garland, The Journal-American, December 20, 1946.
11. Brooks Atkinson, The Times, December 20, 1946.
12. William Hawkins, The World-Telegram, December 20, 1946.
13. Brooks Atkinson, The Times, February 28, 1947.
14. Ward Morehouse, The Sun, February 28, 1947.
15. Brooks Atkinson (see note 13).
16. William Hawkins, The World-Telegram, February 28, 1947.
17. L. F., The Times, December 27, 1948.
18. Robert Coleman, The Daily Mirror, December 27, 1948.
19. M. T., The World-Telegram, December 27, 1948.
20. Theatre Arts, Vol. 34 (May, 1950), p. 15.
21. Howard Barnes, The Herald-Tribune, March 3, 1950.
22. Robert Coleman, The Daily Mirror, March 3, 1950.
23. Brooks Atkinson, The Times, March 3, 1950.

24. Robert Coleman, *The Daily Mirror*, November 27, 1950.

25. Brooks Atkinson, *The Times*, November 27, 1950.

26. John Chapman, *The Daily News*, November 27, 1950.

27. Howard Barnes, *The Herald-Tribune*, December 26, 1950.

28. Brooks Atkinson, *The Times*, December 26, 1950.

29. John Chapman, *The Daily News*, December 26, 1950.

30. John McClain, *The Journal-American*, December 26, 1950.

31. Brooks Atkinson, *The Times*, March 10, 1953.

32. Robert Coleman, *The Daily Mirror*, March 10, 1953.

33. John Chapman, *The Daily News*, March 10, 1953.

34. John McClain, *The Journal-American*, March 10, 1953.

35. Tom Donnelly, *The World-Telegram*, December 20, 1956.

36. John McClain, *The Journal-American*, December 20, 1956.

37. Richard Watts, Jr., *The Post*, December 20, 1956.

38. Brooks Atkinson, *The Times*, December 20, 1956.

39. Walter Kerr, *The Herald-Tribune*, November 13, 1958.

40. Robert Coleman, *The Daily Mirror*, November 13, 1958.

41. John Chapman, *The Daily News*, November 13, 1958.

42. Alan Schneider, "An Evening with Bertolt Brecht," *The New Leader* (January 22, 1962), p. 32.

43. Howard Bay, "Settings," *Theatre Arts*, Vol. 37 (February, 1953), p. 67.

CONCLUSIONS

The American theatre, more than any other theatre in the world, has developed the scenic aspects of production to a very high degree of technical perfection. While America has fostered no permanent producing group or any representative state theatre and operates in a commercial system wherein every production is an entity in itself, the smoothness and efficiency with which these productions move are nowhere to be paralleled. The musical comedy, largely because of highly developed technical skills, has become a cohesive art from in which no other country can compete.

If one were to make a list of the world's most famous theatrical groups to appear since the turn of the century, no American name would appear. These famous groups (The Moscow Art Theatre, the Old Vic, the Comédie Française) have all become famous for a particular style of production, whereas American theatre has never

come to be associated with any one particular style. Yet it seems that this eclectic nature is the very thing that has allowed for continual experimentation and development of all the various arts of the theatre. Thus it is possible to say that the theatre of our country is more representative of a whole theatrical picture than any other theatre in the world.

The role of a designer working in such a theatre becomes vastly complex. His aesthetic philosophy has to be broad enough to encompass all modes of production and his mechanical and technical abilities have to be such that he can keep abreast of and employ all the technical advances that this theatre has developed. Because his role has come to be increasingly significant since the advent of the new stagecraft, a designer must also possess the qualities of a dramatist and a director. According to Norman Bel Geddes and Lee Simonson, it is the designer who determines the pattern of action, and if his designs are going to allow the playwright's intended action to take form, he will necessarily have to possess the mind of the dramatist and the point of view of the director. On the other hand, since sets and costumes constitute a large portion of the budget for any production, a designer working in this commercial system will have to be able to operate within the financial scale set by a producer without sacrificing any artistic intent.

A designer's work, like that of an actor or a director, is affected by various vogues and popular modes which have characterized our theatre since the turn of the century. While the

predominant mode of expression for a designer is in the area of selective realism, recent developments in musical theatre have seen the rise of a highly decorative and lavish style of production. On the other hand, the recent upsurge of the theatre of the absurd has brought expressionism back into vogue. All these various influences determine a designer's approach, and in order for him to keep working he must be able to reflect this wide range of style that characterizes contemporary American theatre.

A designer may have his day and then pass into obscurity. There is no apparent reason or cause that can explain why a designer like Cleon Throckmorton, who was designing most of the big productions in New York during the twenties and thirties, had passed into obscurity by the forties. Some designers never have their day. This, however, does not mean that their contribution to American theatre is without merit, nor does it imply that they are lesser talents. At best it can only mean that a designer is subject to the whims and caprices of public taste as is any artist who relies on public support to maintain his work.

Wolfgang Roth is such an artist. I have called him a representative American designer in that he has proved his ability to work in a wide range of styles and forms with a high degree of critical success. The fact that he has worked successfully both as a producer and as a performer shows him to possess qualities necessary to fill the various roles a designer has to play. He has worked in opera, ballet, and the legitimate theatre; he has worked both in and out of New York; he has worked with big and

well-established producers as well as small and inexperienced ones; he has had his successes and he has had his failures. Chances are that he will never be "in vogue," but he and several other designers like him go to make up a large portion of the working designers in America, and without their individual and combined contributions, American scene design and American technical theatre would not be at the advanced level that it is today.

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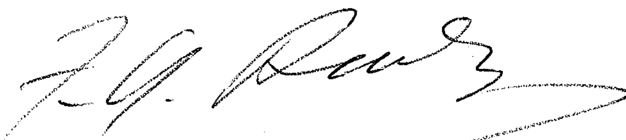
Approved



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