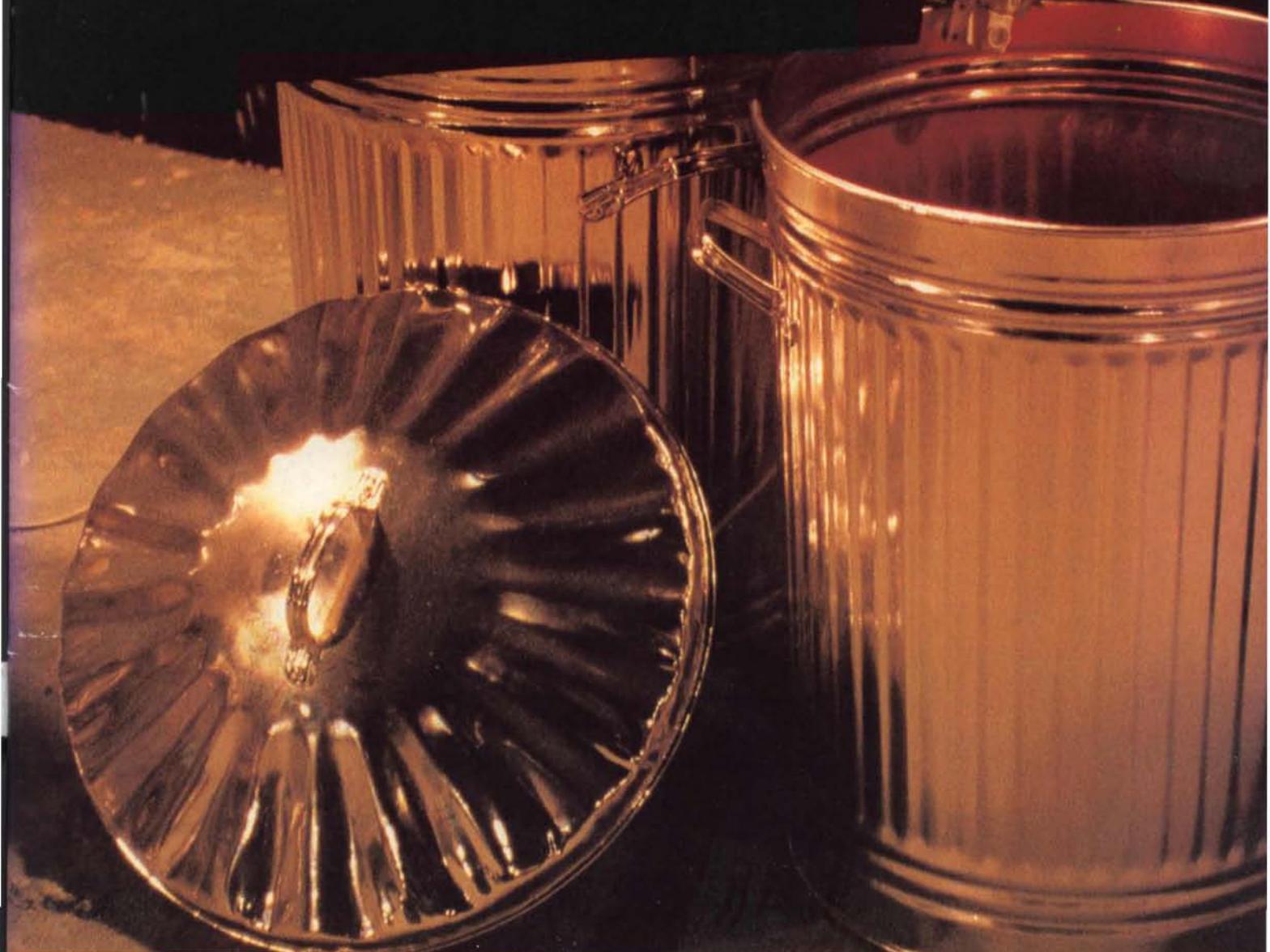


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# OF GARBAGE & GOLD: GREAT BRITAIN AT PQ'91

BY LINDA SARVER

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

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

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

Her answers set me at ease. Theatre is

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

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

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

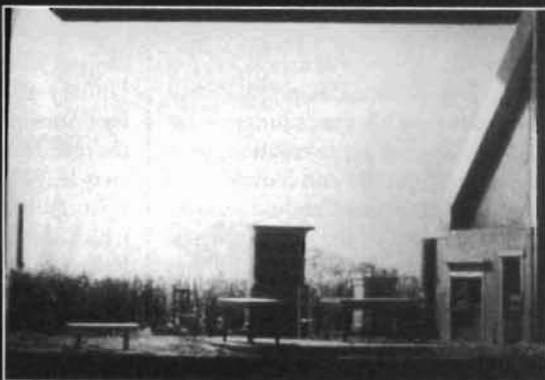
designer of the exhibit. Great Britain's 1991 exhibit included the finest examples of recent work by some world-class designers and Howard's installation was both arresting and evocative. While a thousand of my words will not be equal to the experience of viewing these designs and this installation,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

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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

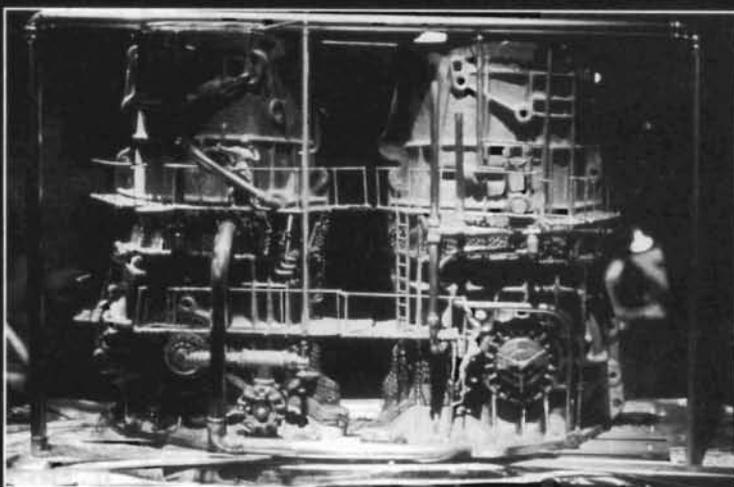
The presentation of the model for *Twelfth Night* included a bowl of apples, red and yellow, recessed in front of the design. These apples were splashed with paint that seem to be poured from two buckets, black and green, embedded in the inside walls of the garbage bag, above and to the sides of the model. The garbage bag was gathered and tied at the top, near the ceiling of the room and it sprouted paints-spattered tree branches. Primary green paint spilled down the outside of the bag from the top and also from the two peek hole slits. It was a lot of fun to see these two brilliant designs that had been relegated to the trash bag and—like all theatre—were waiting for the garbage truck to collect them.



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5. "LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST" BY TIMOTHY O'BRIEN.

6. "HAMLET" BY ANTHONY MCDONALD.

7. "METROPOLIS" BY RALPH KOLTAI.

8. "TWELFTH NIGHT" BY TIMOTHY O'BRIEN.