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SEEING AMERICA CLEARLY



BY LINDA SARVER

In the weeks before PQ '95 I saw a florid magenta set for *Sweet Bird of Youth* in London, a turquoise green one for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in Hong Kong, and an "action design" setting for *They're Playing Our Song* in Bratislava, so I was prepared to see American theatre through another culture's eyes when I got to Prague, and I was not disappointed. The image of America that is revealed in the theatrical designs of American plays by designers from around the world teaches us a lot about ourselves that we couldn't see on our own stages. While I was looking at the many national exhibits in Prague's Exposition Hall, I was reminded of Edward Albee's celebrated line from *Zoo Story*, "Sometimes you have to go a long distance out of your way in order to come back a short distance correctly." Sometimes you have to go to Prague to see America clearly.

With my camera in my right hand, I went looking for America in the various national exhibits that the PQ '95 exhibit catalog in my left hand told me included designs for plays by American playwrights. I thought it would be an easy task, as these are plays I know well: *Death of a Salesman*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Luv*, *The Crucible*, and *Of Mice and Men*. Though I didn't know it when I set out, I soon learned I was on a hunt for an enriched understanding of my native land.

The first place I stopped was in front of the Swedish exhibition. It was a large Plexiglas cube filled with nearly fifty scenic models, and I walked around all four sides trying to find the designs for *Death of a Salesman*. I couldn't, so I started reading the labels, and I was astonished by scenographer Sören Brunes's two models for *Death of a Salesman* (Plaza, Stockholm, 1995). They were the first to teach me the truth I was reminded of regularly in the coming days, that I might not always recognize what I was looking for; that America wouldn't always look the way I expected it to. With my American frame of reference, the mention of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* immediately produced the Pavlovian imagistic response of Jo Mielziner's celebrated sketch. I wasn't expecting to find a vivid green 1930s roadster whose sole passenger was a gigantic egg. Nor was I looking for the model that had

three extremely steep red-lacquered stairs with a huge rock poised at the top, tenuously restrained from crushing the tiny downstage human figure by a zig-zag of thin red cord. Where's the refrigerator? How about the boys' twin beds? Obviously this Swedish scenographer was looking at Miller's play in ways I'd never imagined. Time to take my imagination off "cruise control" and throw to the winds traditional, preconceived ways of seeing. Time to see *Salesman* metaphorically; and not just *Salesman*.

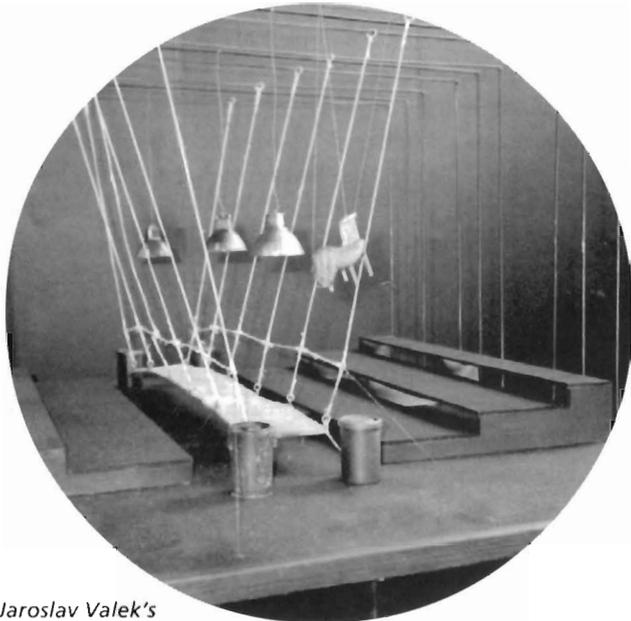
I now viewed myself as a sceno-detective on the hunt for the unexpected perception of American drama. Rather than being threatened by the loss of visual familiarity, I was on a treasure hunt whose reward was an illuminating look at those classic plays I'd always associated with fossilized visual images.



Production photo
of György Szegő's setting for Tennessee Williams'
The Glass Menagerie, directed by J. Taub, 1993.

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

Wandering into the Hungarian exhibit, I was looking for something that suggested St. Louis in the 1930s, a fire escape, a living room with little glass animals. What I found was a full stage cityscape of Manhattan skyscrapers lit up at night and placed behind a domestic interior. The architecture of the Chrysler Building was quite distinct in the drop's foreground, and it certainly wasn't any part of the St. Louis I know. To me, this was not just generic metropolis, but clearly and familiarly it was New York City. But perhaps to a designer whose only images of America are formed from movies and travel posters, an American city is an American city—and the quintessence of it is the Manhattan skyline. I looked closer and found that the wall which defined the interior space from the exterior world was formed by a clear "glass" wall of skyscraper shapes whose irregular tops and soaring verticals were outlined in black. Even the door to the Wingfield's apartment was entirely made of clear glass. In this design by Hungarian scenographer, György Szegő for the 1993 production of *The Glass Menagerie* directed by J. Taub at the Szolnoki Szigligeti Színház, the Wingfields' world is a glass menagerie—dangerously fragile and oppressively confining. I'd never thought to expand that metaphor beyond Laura and her unicorn.



Jaroslav Valek's
model of Murray Schisgal's *Luv*, directed by S. Korenci, 1991.

LUV

The Slovakian exhibit included Murray Schisgal's play, *Luv*, which takes place right in Manhattan. This time I was looking for an urban exterior with a bridge over the Hudson or East Rivers, and I wanted something sprightly to reveal the spirit of this antic comedy. The catalogue told me *Luv* had been produced in 1991 by the Divadlo Slovenského Národného Povstania Martin with scenography by Jaroslav Valek. This production of *Luv* didn't look like anything I had seen before. The theatre space appeared to be a rectangular black box with audience seating running down each of the two long sides. In the middle, between the two sections of audience, was a natural wooden plank footbridge with tan twine suspension ropes angled outward to form a blunt-bottomed "V" as they stretched from footbridge to the black pipe ceiling grid. It looked less

like a bridge over New York's troubled waters than one over the River Kwai. Horizontal twine ropes connected the vertical supports to create a handrail on each side of the footbridge. Two round black cylinders which stood on the floor at each end of the footbridge seemed to mark the bridge's termination points. Equally spaced above the footbridge were suspended three silver lamps. Above the bridge, at one end, were two hanging objects—an armless plain white wooden chair and a gilded wing with carved feathers. Okaaaaaay...what is this all about? The footbridge didn't look like an urban artery carrying aggressively honking taxis and trucks. Maybe this is the rickety bridge of human relations? And that wing hanging above the set must be Cupid's! I realized that the small scale of the scenic elements would make the characters appear big, more important than they would in front of the cityscape I remember from the Broadway production. Valek's scenography suggested to me that this is the story of two people who bridge human loneliness, in spite of their precarious relationship, to find love.

THE CRUCIBLE

The Hungarian exhibit also included a scenic model of another American play, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. In my mind I saw images of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 17th century, and I remember fondly my last visit to the historically accurate Plymouth Plantation. I look around for a model that provides for the multiple locations of Miller's script—the child's bedroom, Proctor's house, the clearing in the woods, the meeting hall where the trial takes place, the jail cell. Not finding it, I resort to reading labels again and discover that Hungarian scenographer Zolt Khell's design for the 1995 production at the Csiky Gergely Színház in Kaposvár looks like the interior of a factory or some governmental institution. A prison, maybe? Dominating the space is a large flight of stairs center-stage. Each side of this has various levels and playing spaces where I suppose small scenes could be staged. A window stage-right, and two doors (one up-center and one stage-left) appear to be the only means of egress and exit. The entire set has a high sheen surface, like smooth stone or concrete—there's not a hand-hewn wooden beam in sight. The metallic turquoise color covering the walls, ceiling, and most of the floor had the acid quality which I associate with aniline dyes or the chemical residue left by "cyclon B" in the gas chambers at the concentration camp at Majdanek, Poland. The concrete slab interior was relieved only with industrial detailing—some pipes with valves upstage left, a pipe railing on the stairs downstage left, and a large hook suspended from a pulley downstage right. It looks like a side of beef should be hung on it. Will that be where Proctor dies? Atop a narrow flight of stairs stage-left is a stainless steel door with a small window in the upper section. It's the sort you see in hospitals. The up-center door is raised off the floor and is flush with the wall. It reminds me of the doors on a ship or submarine. This is not a place where the cruelty people inflict upon one another in the name of religion can be masked behind lots of Early American copper pots and hand-carved bedsteads with hand-woven coverlets. All of those sentimental and diverting historical details are stripped away to focus on the raw human emotion of this savage play. I wish the exhibition showed me how the inhabitants of this space were costumed.

PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

I felt my skills as a sceno-detective were getting sharper and that I was learning to analyze a scenographer's metaphor, so I welcomed the

chance to test myself in the Syrian exhibit. A colleague placed me in front of a model, covered up the label, and challenged me to “name that play.” I looked at a domestic room of earthy browns—wood floor and dirt or clay walls. There was one door up center, and the floor was covered in carpets with geometric patterns that suggested native American cultures to me, but who knows what they meant to a Syrian scenographer? Carpets hung overhead, as well, and the only furniture was a counter. What well-known play happens indoors, has one door up center, has a counter in the up left corner and a fireplace in the right wall? And has an earthy feeling that suggests a peasant’s environment? *Playboy of the Western World*. (see photo p. 42) I astonished myself more than my colleague by guessing right, even though this design had nothing Irish about it at all.

OF MICE AND MEN

In an exhibit in the United States I’d have found John Steinbeck’s famous play by looking for images of 1937, a Western ranch exterior, and the bunk beds and cast-iron stove that are needed for the action. But the sceno-detective in me was getting wily, so when I entered the Swedish exhibit and stood before Sören Brunen’s model for the Stockholm City Theatre’s production, I wasn’t surprised. This setting seems to have two playing levels, one above the other, that create two distinct worlds, clearly delineated. Do these establish two temporal realities—one now and one in 1937? The theatre this setting was designed for looks like some kind of unusual thrust, huge in scale. The upstage surround is all black, and the back wall is pierced by two rectangular openings. These are backed by a blue sky in front of which grows a field of bleached straw-like vegetation that extends all the way downstage left establishing the hue of the monochromatic setting. The central playing area and the space stage-right are made from bleached plank flooring. There is cut straw strewn everywhere except for a small area in center stage that is filled with a bleached wooden table and four wooden cubes that serve as stools—this is the bunk house, I guess. On a slightly lower level,



Zsolt Khell’s model
of Arthur Miller’s *The Witches of Salem*
(*The Crucible*), directed by Janos Mohacsi, 1995.

adjacent to the bunk house table and protruding out of the straw field, is the top of a larger-than-life-size brain! Is this a hillock the characters can sit on? Does this relate to Lenny? Underneath this playing space is a lower-level playing area composed of a circle bisected by a straight ramp which comes out from underneath the upstage platform above it—all composed of wooden planking. At the terminus of the ramp, isolated inside the circle, is an upholstered armchair. On either side behind the chair, two choruses of ghostly figures spring shrieking from the gap created by the intrusion of the ramp through the circle. These ghostly figures remind me of Edvard Munch’s agonized and haunting apparitions.



Production photo of
Robert Ebeling’s setting for Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf...?*, directed by R. Gröber, 1993.

WHO’S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

A quick stop at the German exhibit showed me Robert Ebeling’s design for Edward Albee’s famous play. Nothing in this design suggested an academic’s home—nary a bookshelf in sight—and nothing suggested northeastern America—no chintz-covered furniture, no oriental carpets, and no paneled wainscoting. Instead, I found a high-tech and ultra modern interior with a tall glass panel revealing the pine trees outside, and all of it in abruptly angled walls that bespeak Expressionism more than the Realism I’ve always associate with Albee’s play. Yet in retrospect, I believe this play about the tension between illusion and reality in which the epic battle of the sexes is played out in Strindbergian passions and Wildean verbiage is better expressed in this setting than in any other I have seen.

American plays which are as familiar to me as my favorite pair of slippers, looked strange when seen through the eyes of non-American scenographers. Their theatrical language is not formed by Hollywood-style realism nor by the traditions of American stage design. Yet after having studied the models and renderings of designers from Hungary, Sweden, Syria, Slovakia, and Germany, I now see America more clearly. ❖

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