THE SECRET OF THEATRICAL SPACE

The Memoirs of Josef Svoboda

Edited and translated

by

J. M. Burian

APPLAUSE
THEATRE BOOKS

INTRODUCTION

I may have been twelve or thirteen; it was early spring or late fall—in any case it was nasty outside, cold and damp—and I had a bad sore throat. Although Mother wrapped my neck with cloths filled with heated bran, I felt sick and my only true comfort was the radio by my bedside.

A radio receiver in those days was not nearly as routine as it is today, and although I had previously explored the device inside out, it was only now that I began to grasp the actual benefits of that magical little box. I didn't feel like reading, so I listened to the radio from morning till night. I enjoyed the feeling that even though I had to stay in bed, I was still being informed about absolutely everything. Those fourteen days of being cut off from the world while still feeling that I had an intimate connection with it left a deep and lasting impression on me.

Svoboda in the mid-1970s in the historic Teatro Olympico, Vicenza, Italy.

I heard architecture discussed for the first time on that radio. The lecturer defined architecture as a kind of ground plan of life, which I have believed from that day to this. The lecturer characterized an architect as one who has to know absolutely everything about human activity and life itself. I have always gravitated toward synthesis in everything (even after the most self-destructive analysis). So, at an age when I wanted to be a painter, philosopher, engineer, and even an inventor, chance provided me with the glowing, comforting assurance that I could be all those things if only I were a good architect.

It's no surprise, therefore, that soon my most admired idols became Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and all their Renaissance peers. They remain so today because I'm convinced that encoded within them are all the significant meanings of human existence. I was almost forty when I first stood face to face with them in Italy, but I realized that not until that moment had I begun to understand the immortality and infinite possibilities of the human spirit. The Sistine Chapel was just in the process of repair and I was allowed to climb the scaffolding for a close look. And there, a little above me, I could see Adam's hand just separating from the fingers of the Creator, as if the spark of life were still quivering between them. I stood thunderstruck at the idea of a painter lying on his back, a candle glued to his forehead, and painting a final version directly into the wet plaster, as if writing his message to future generations. And all the more so in Florence in the Buonorotti Gallery with the torsos of Michelangelo! Never before and never since have I had a more intense feeling of being allowed to participate in the mystery of the origin of a work of art.

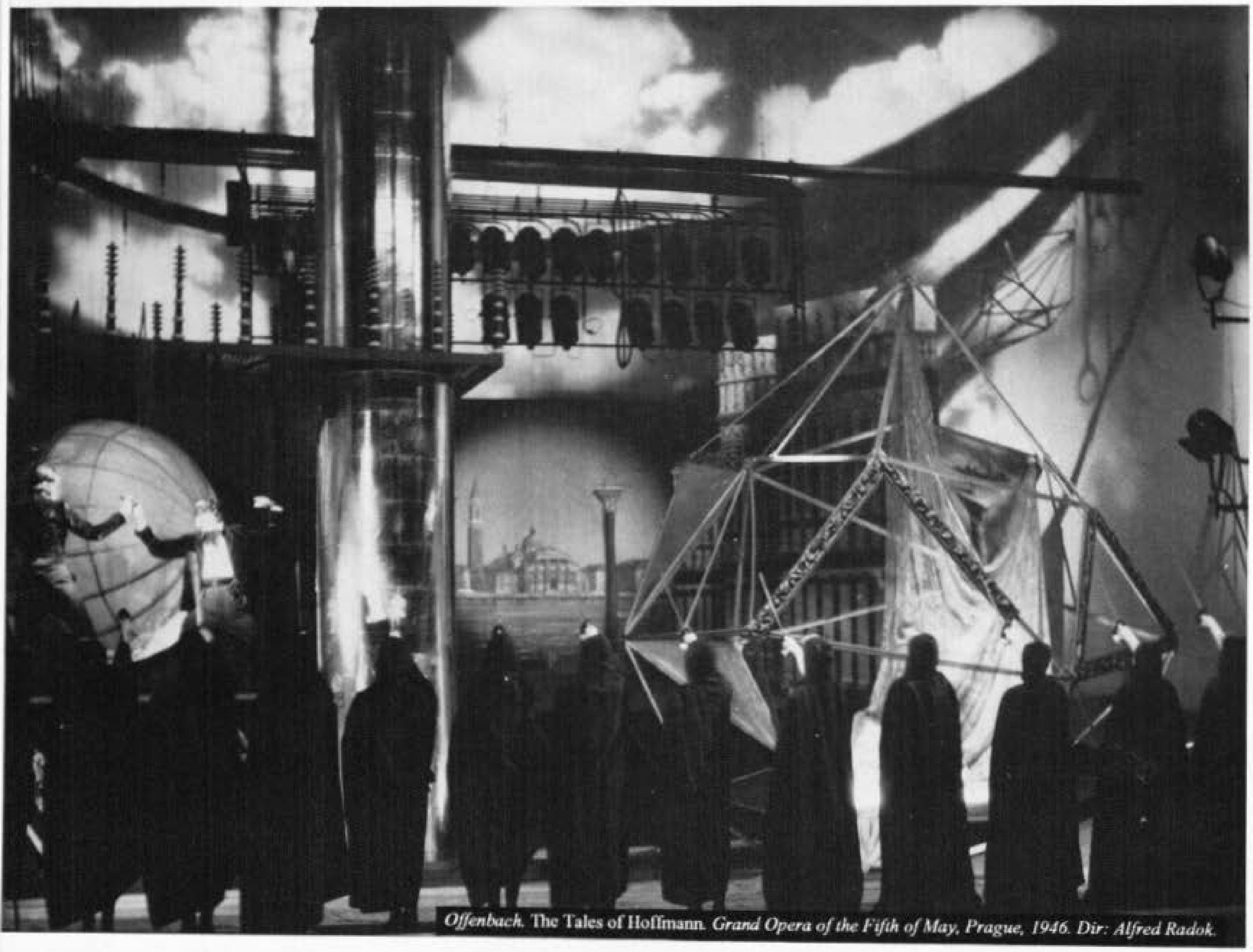
The stones that were simultaneously statues revealed not only the intimate dialogue of sculptor and matter, but also his stubborn, often tortured seeking for the heart of that stone. And never have I been more convinced that hidden within every work of art is a force that can allow a person to glimpse the secret of life.

Opposite: Zindel, P. The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds. *National Theatre, Prague, 1972. Dir: J. Pleskot. The literally thousands of spheres that filled most of the space were suspended from the flies; lighting determined the degree to which they were emphasized or subordinated.*

The designer's participation in production has had the most varied designations. The Germans and we Czechs, following them, have referred to stage "outfitting" (*Ausstattung* or *Výprava*, respectively); in English-speaking countries "stage design" is the usual term; in France, "decoration." These terms reduce a designer's collaboration to "framing" the dramatic work, rather than sharing in its complete creation. But if we consider the experiences and history of Italian theatre and its designers (e.g., Serlio, Palladio, and Galia da Bibiena), we discover that they were joint authors of the theatrical action. Without their "marvels," drama could not have taken place in its full expressiveness and significance, and Italian theatre would have been the poorer. To render a more precise, more complete, and more meaningful designation of our artistic role, I prefer the term "scenography."

In 1911 Josef Čapek wrote, "The true modern sensibility is a real lover of speed. It seems to me that quickness of perception has become a form of aesthetic value for modern man." If this applied that many years ago to painting, it applied and still applies all the more to scenography, which works with kinetic images distributed in space and in the flow of time. Moreover, creative scenography cannot be done for its own sake; you must have fellow workers who have a sense of partnership with scenography.

It's necessary for the entire theatrical team to have a collective perception of space, movement, rhythm, and time during the work's preparation. Several important things take place during this period: the creative shaping of various spaces, and the development of certain relationships—between details and the whole, between objects and subjects, between the live, corporeal stage action and perhaps film or other technologies. Without a thorough weighing of such antithetical forces, and without a willing acceptance of assignments by the individual production components, you cannot prepare a production "program."



Offenbach. The Tales of Hoffmann. *Grand Opera of the Fifth of May, Prague, 1946. Dir: Alfred Radok.*

An effective program always comes about by agreement. The preparation of a theatre production reminds me of an orchestra tuning up. The players must bring their instruments to peak performance level; then the conductor arrives and a unified whole emerges.

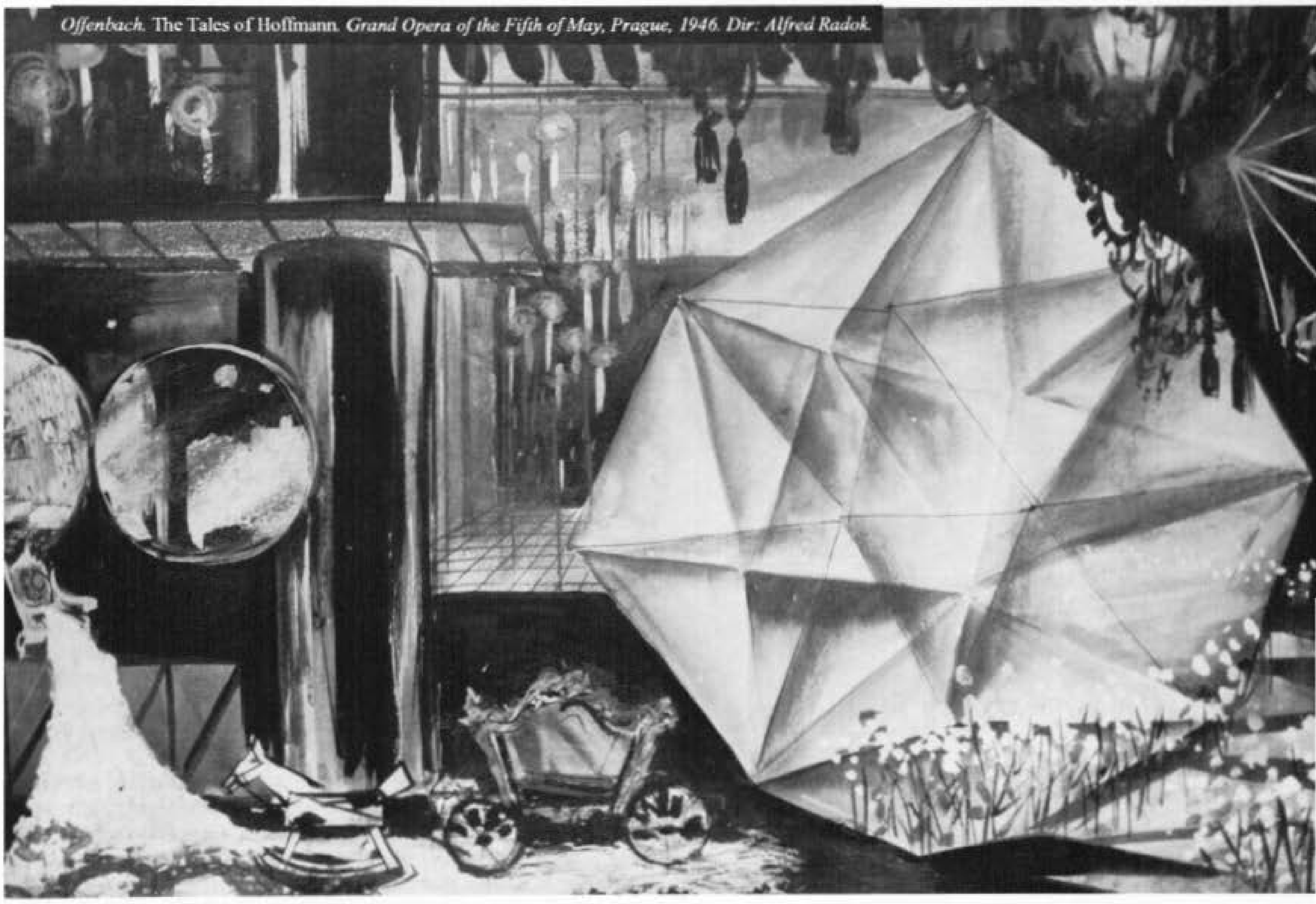
I helped to formulate an overall program twice in my life: immediately after the war at the Theatre of the Fifth of May and later at the National Theatre. These programs encompassed only what flowed from the personal involvement of all who shared in them. Our fundamental starting point was the awareness that theatre is a collective art.

After the war, we all felt a driving need to continue from where the prewar avant-garde prematurely left off. We wanted to develop their discovery of dramatic space. But concurrent with this linkage to the past, we were already searching for our own new alphabet, namely the laws relating to the movement and transformation of scenography during the flow of dramatic action.

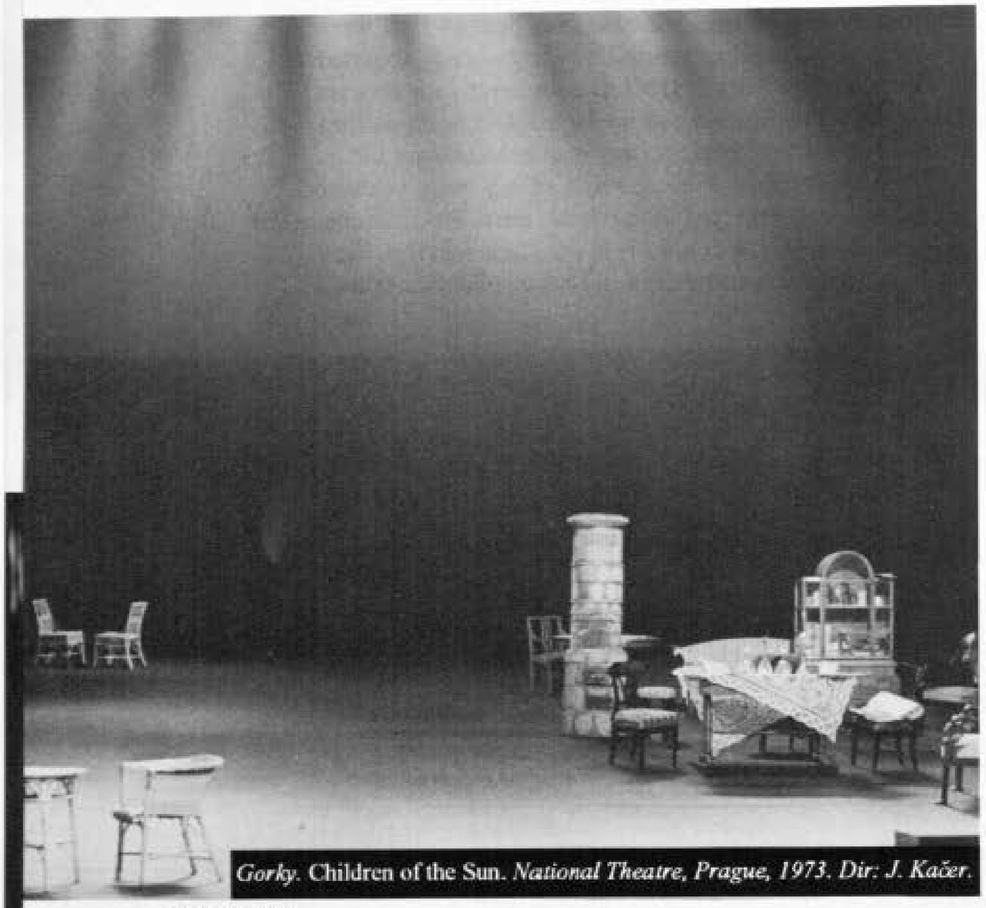
In the formal sense, our work was virtually identical with our prewar models. In principle, however, we shifted our attention from a concern with a coherent whole to its seemingly estranged parts. Further variations then included the principle of collage. For example, painted flats were joined with fragile, spatially conceived skeletal constructions, until by degrees there emerged an abstract spatial composition shaped by light. The composition balanced on the very border between an actual object and its painted reproduction. Indeed, some of my early postwar scenic proposals emerged along these lines. For example, *The Tales of Hoffmann* and, later, *The Devil's Wall* employed skeletal constructions in conjunction with painted pictures; it was, in effect, a near equivalency if not identity of elements.

My work was, of course, not without precedent. When I did my very first serious scenography during the war for *Empedocles*, František Salzer called my work Tairovian. The name meant little to me at that time. I had only a foggy sense of Tairov's theory of an unchained theatre. At the time, Tairov was inaccessible to me, and yet I seemed to absorb his influence.

Just as there is a law of the conservation of energy, there's also a law that the accumulated experiences and discoveries of a given generation produce a certain psychic energy that begins to permeate the culture at large. Through literature and painting, like X-rays, it even reaches people



Offenbach. The Tales of Hoffmann. *Grand Opera of the Fifth of May, Prague, 1946. Dir: Alfred Radok.*



Gorky. Children of the Sun. *National Theatre, Prague, 1973. Dir: J. Kačer.*

Photo: Jaromir Svoboda

who live in isolation. Nothing is completely lost. And one day the effect of such experiences and discoveries begins to spread like the flow of lava, creating new conventions of seeing and perception for a given age.

In my postwar productions, as well, I must have subconsciously reflected Tairov's conceptions. Of course, there was one fundamental difference. I proceeded to uncouple skeletal construction from pictorial image. I made of them two antithetical elements so contrasting that one denied (in fact, excluded) the other. And if they did create a whole, then it was a distinctly artificial whole. I made no attempt at a synthesis or a homogeneous form. My directorial collaborators in the Theatre of the Fifth of May did exactly the same. They shattered the illusionistic pseudo-coherence of theatre, de-articulated its individual genres, with which we could then freely build, handling them contrapuntally, or merging realities that at first glance seemed incompatible—the past with the present, historical styles with elements of modern civilization. We played out the whole scale of genres from tragedy and grand opera to grotesque farce and fairground frolic. It enabled us to work with the elementary components of theatre and to parody theatre with theatre.[1] Our youthful program was indeed that simple. We were for expressive suggestiveness and against illusionism. Moreover, ours was a theatre of spotlights, not atmospheric, mystic illumination.

It was also generally said of our early work that we drew from impressionism. That, of course, is true; it would be foolish to deny the influence of impressionistic painting. Whatever the school or style of painting might be, scenography has a special, paradoxical, relationship to it. After all, it's perfectly possible that certain subjects which have the effect of obvious anachronism or anomaly in a painting may become surprisingly authentic and relevant on stage.

Light, for example. The impressionists discovered it for painting, and modern painting subsequently rejected it for its illusionism, but without exhausting all of its possibilities. Light has remained an inexhaustible and unending inspiration for my work.

From the very beginning, I naturally searched, consciously and unconsciously, for my own method of work. Of course, it required self-recognition. For example, I've known for a long time that I work best when time is critically short, when I have to make decisions quickly and definitively. This very risky method depends strictly on feeling and instinct, with thought becoming a spontaneous reflex, as in self-defense. It's like a great improvisation, which would, of course, be an irremediable disaster if it were not backed up by many years of carefully thought through and tenacious work.

Sometimes, perhaps as a reward, you're helped by pure chance, or, perhaps more precisely, a sudden insight, at which point I'm always amazed at how much I didn't see because I was staring too hard. Does the impulse to "insight" come from the outside or has it lain within me for a long time like an unexposed film which developed on its own? All such insights and accidents are, of course, usable only to the extent that they have objective validity at the given moment. Columbus's discovery of America was, according to the Surrealists, an "objective accident." Every banality is full of miracles that can be seen only by one who is able to give them order and form and a logical place in his work.

Giotto wanted to paint the foam on the mouth of a mad dog on one of his frescoes. He tried it ten times, twenty times, and then furiously flung a sponge at the abortive spot. The sponge, soaked with color, created a porous mass of foam on the wall, exactly what the painter had imagined. Or Delacroix. Almost unconsciously he stopped in Saint Sulpice square, flooded in sunshine, and observed a boy climbing the statues in a fountain. Suddenly he became aware of what he was seeing: a dark orange color in the light, the most vivid violet at the edges of the shadows, and golden reflections in the shadows cast on the ground. The orange and the violet alternated, sometimes blended; the golden tone was seemingly tinged with green. He noted this precisely in his diary long before impressionism.

Think of the number of people who strolled the paths of autumnal parks long before the painter who "discovered" rays of sunlight among the branches of the trees and the shifting net of shadows on the ground! It's just that the first impressionist was able to record his vision with the aid of Delacroix's colors, assess the value of the optical perception that maintains our contact with the world, demonstrate the significance of the surface of things, and determine rules for the play of colored and black spots which join on the retina of the eye and become transformed into a final atmospheric, illusionistic form. He thereby solved the puzzle of the changes in colors as they join. I think it's a miracle each time I join blue and yellow pigment on my palette and the result is green. Or when I blend red, green, and blue light from three spotlights aimed so as to overlap each other precisely on a white surface and the result is white.

Even today, I regard the return to the impressionists as logical, not anachronistic, especially in theatre. After all, the greatest problem in theatre from the beginning has been light, form, and movement, which joins them—and those are the primary problems of impressionism. But it's not only a matter of labels; one problem necessarily calls up a second, a third. Moreover, it's possible to learn from completely different, unexpected sources.

For example, Helmholtz, Metzger, and other physicists also thoroughly studied these problems. They established a scale of brightness which we can register optically. They verified the adaptable and apperceptive capabilities of the human eye. They also experimented with color, with perspective, and with optical illusions, as if they were imitating Giorgio Vasari. They alternated red squares with gray ones—and the red squares seemed to come forward, whereas the sides of the squares, placed at a diagonal, seemed to collapse.

The human eye can estimate the absolute size of an illuminated surface only with difficulty. It is far better at estimating the contrast between the illumination of two neighboring surfaces or the contrast of two separate illuminations, one after the other.

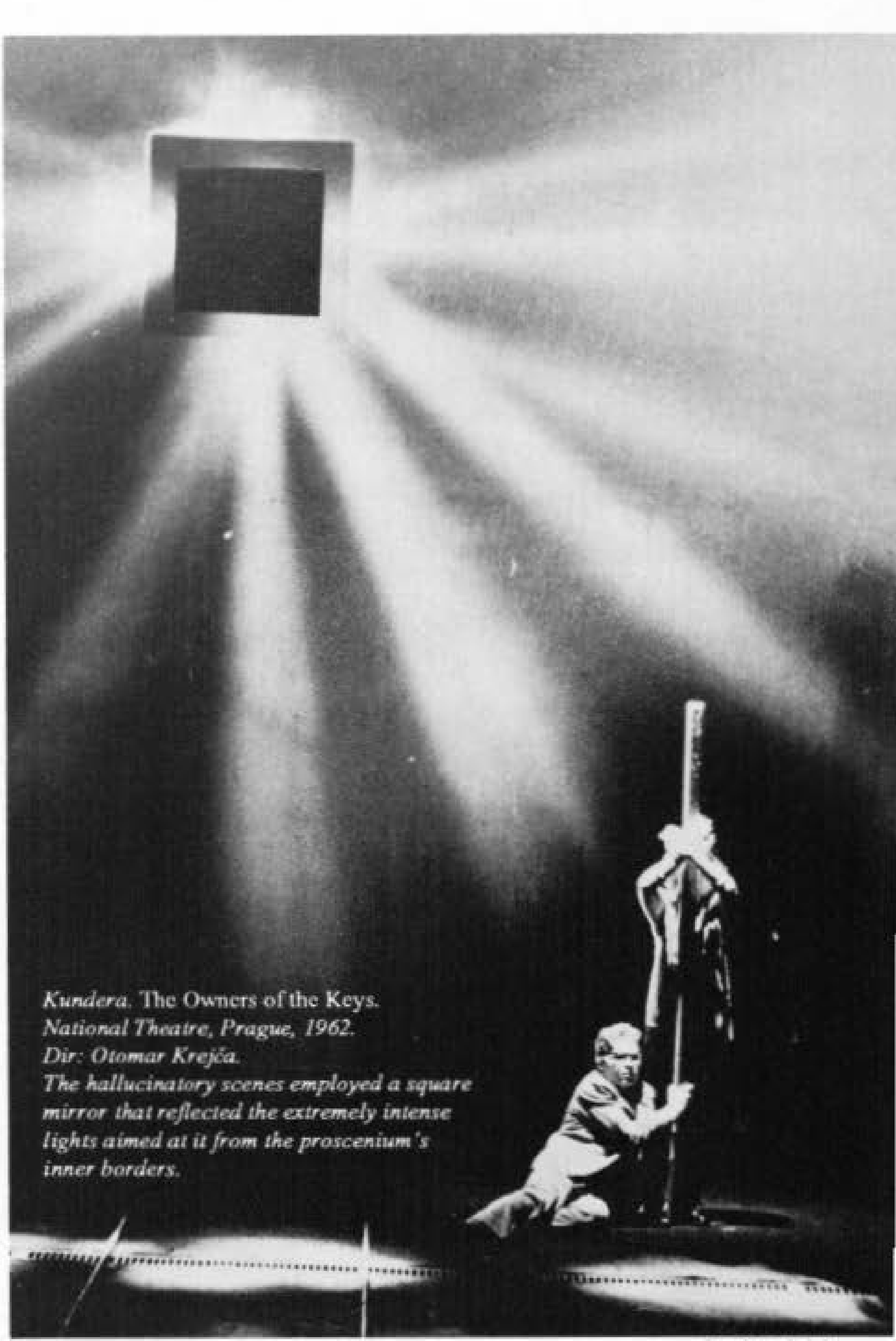
Impressionism has within it links to the Baroque, to romanticism, to illusionism, and so on. But it is also the beginning of modern art because it is precisely in impressionism that, after a long interval, art begins to collaborate with science once again.

This union of art and science is essential and vitally necessary for our time. It provides art with a rational basis and helps us to carry our investigations further. If I need a cylinder of light on stage with a dispersion of less than one degree at its base, I need to gather an entire scientific and technical team to construct such a cylinder. Only with such a team were we able to put together a hollow cylinder of light for *Tristan and Isolde* in Cologne in 1969.[2]

The same approach was necessary for experiments with variations of mirror reflections or sculpturesque effects by means of lighting. At the time I worked mainly with white, daytime light. I was concerned with its form; I worked with it as if it were a substance, a mass. When I wanted a figure to disappear suddenly from the stage, I needed to solve the technical question of how to turn spotlights on and off as quickly and precisely as a shot from a rifle. We furnished the spotlights with shutters of the kind that are found in cameras, and we established their most effective exposure at one-fifth of a second. None of these discoveries resulted from caprice, nor did we solve any task in an offhand manner. The reason was always dramatic necessity.

In 1958 I was asked the question on a survey, "Does modern technology belong in modern theatre in the same way that an elevator belongs in a modern house?" I thought the question was posed entirely incorrectly. Whether or not technology belongs in theatre isn't an issue at all—there can be no doubt that it does—but what function does it have in it, and how does it function in the dramatic work? And you can't answer that with a formula.

Some eras have searched for formulas, needless to say without success. It is perhaps already clear that you can't do static theatre, in which scenery rigidly gazes down on actions played out within its space. After all, what is actually fixed in the stream of life? Is a room in which someone declares love the same as a room in which someone is dying? By the same token, a summer pond with an unending horizon is not transformed solely by the atmosphere of the day, but primarily by the gaze of those who stand on its shores. Gordon Craig once explained it in a note that actually foreshadowed his design drama, *The Stairs*: "Have you ever been in love and had the feeling that the street before you suddenly expands, that houses grow, sing, lose themselves, and it seems to you that the street darkens drastically, levitates, and becomes transformed into a cloud? In reality you were walking along an ordinary street—or so everyone claims, but it's a lie, don't believe them, keep faith in your own truth, which is the truth of ecstasy."



Kundera. The Owners of the Keys.
National Theatre, Prague, 1962.
Dir: Otomar Krejča.
The hallucinatory scenes employed a square mirror that reflected the extremely intense lights aimed at it from the proscenium's inner borders.

Photo: Jaromír Svoboda

But we are able to perceive truth and understand it only

Schorm, et al: Odysseus. Laterna Magika, Prague, 1987. Dir: Evald Schorm.

Photo: Laterna Magika

under certain circumstances. I constantly and stubbornly have tried to gauge the disproportion of forces between the artificial reality of theatre and "real" reality; an actual construction juxtaposed to the background of "artificially" painted trees in *The Devil's Wall* or the photomontage in *The Tales of Hoffmann*; stereometric forms and film projection (more precisely a kinetic montage) in *Astray*; mobile Renaissance architecture with a landscape painting placed at its center in the 1954 production of *Rigoletto*. All of these attempts have one thing in common—artifice, emphatic artifice as a foundation for the building of a scenic image. Such consciously contrived "illusion" can never result in disillusionment and reveal the falseness of things. In other words, there's more truth and honesty in conscious artifice than in a traditional illusion of reality.

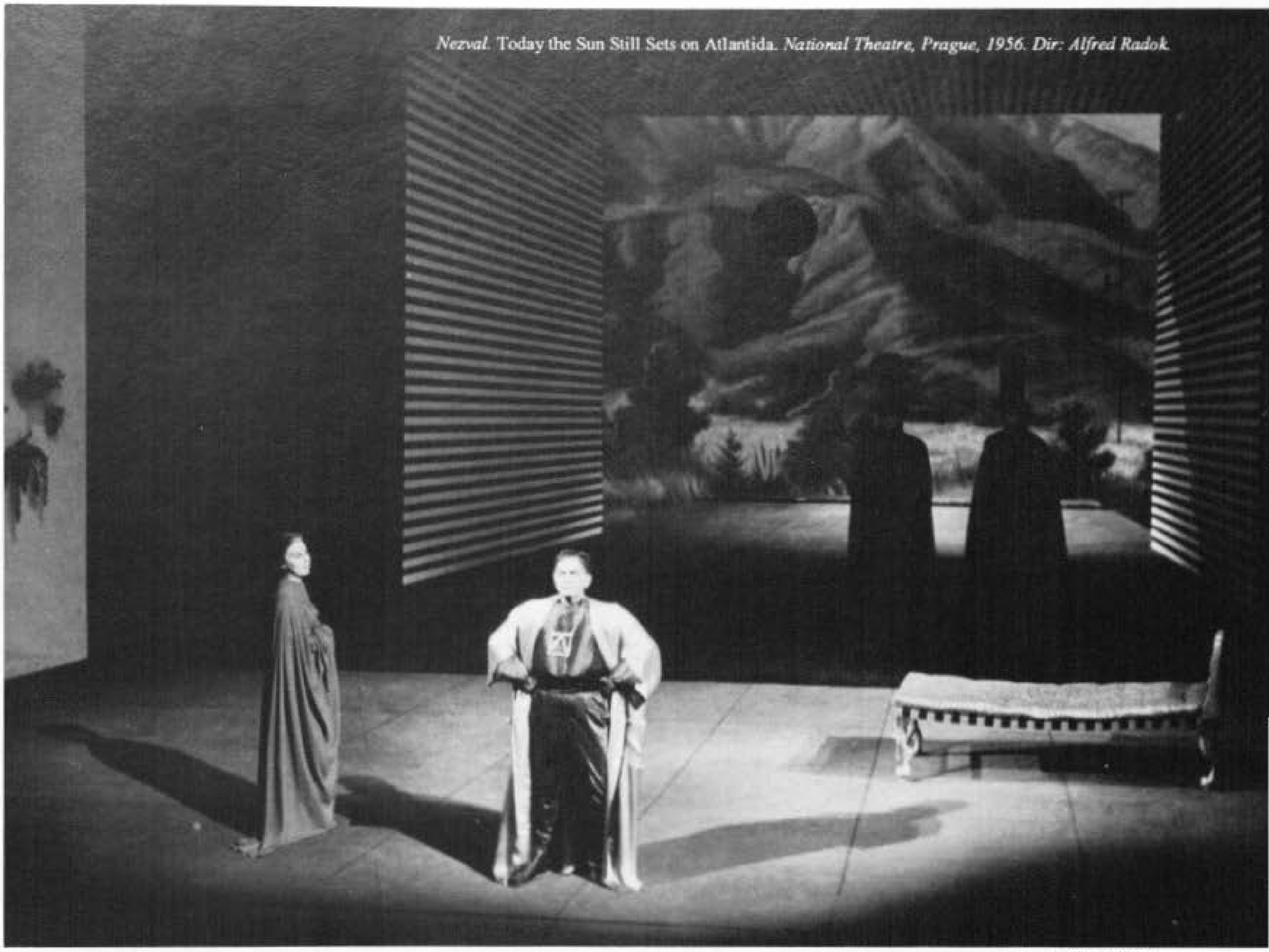
At the Theatre of the Fifth of May we knew it was possible to fabricate most everything on stage, but we nevertheless avoided any products of nature. The possibilities for creating illusion on the stage aren't nearly as great as the neorealistic aesthetic of the 1930s believed. Moreover, such possibilities certainly don't remain stable; they vary according to eras. Actually, theatre from its very origin has been coping with the dilemma of illusionism and anti-illusionism. The inclination toward one or the other pole always meant a change in style.

John Philip Kemble and Charles Kean staked everything on stage machinery and illusionistic spectacle, while in reaction to them the anti-illusionistic movement fought for the rehabilitation of Shakespeare under the leadership of Karl Zimmermann, the creator of the Shakespearean stage of fixed architecture, inspired by Renaissance models. And the result? Anti-illusionism was shown to be only a seeming antithesis, especially if we view it through the eyes of an actor forced to play in an historically accurate but "mute" surrounding which neither supported him nor established active contact with him.

And we can continue the dialectic from Antoine and Stanislavsky to their antitheses in the constructivists, Craig, and the designers of the Bauhaus. However paradoxical it may sound, antitheses can be antitheses only when they have at least one point of contact in common. Otherwise they miss each other entirely. In fact, placing illusionism and anti-illusionism into opposition is entirely pointless. The measure of this mistake is the actor. An anti-illusionistic stage compels him to represent everything the stage itself is unable to represent; it compels him to strengthen illusionism. After all, the actor is the single indispensable element of theatre; he carries within him the potential and the necessity for his transformation into a dramatic character, the basic element of illusionism.

I know all this today. But I was once an anti-illusionist, and then an illusionist; now I'd rather speak of suggestion, which is their point of contact, suggestion based on transformation. And that's where I see the fundamental difference between the old illusionistic theatre and today's theatre. I'm not interested in making a burning bush or an erupting volcano on stage, in creating an illusion of reality, but in acknowledging the reality of theatrical elements, which can be transformed nonmaterially into almost anything. I've called them "space in space." For years this possibility of infinite transformation has fascinated me, as has the search for the real, authentic, and inherent reality of the stage.

The stage floor, the proscenium arch, the ceiling, and the relationship of stage and audience space—these function merely as determinants of dramatic space, its external resources that define it and demarcate it optically. But what is played out within this space? No one became more thoroughly involved with these problems than Vlastislav Hofman. At the time when his work was peaking, he solved them with obvious urgency in the dramatization of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*, as well as in Solochov's *Distressed Earth*. Hofman revealed



Nezval. Today the Sun Still Sets on Atlantida. *National Theatre, Prague, 1956. Dir: Alfred Radok.*

Photo: Jaromir Svoboda

the side section of structures and doubled the proscenium arch, thereby doubly emphasizing that transparent wall stretched across the proscenium arch, behind which the dramatic characters live as though unseen. In so doing, he posed the question of space in space in its most elemental form, although it would remain a question of static space.

In Vitezslav Nezval's play *Today the Sun Still Sets on Atlantida* (1956), I added a secondary black proscenium arch graphically reinforced by horizontal lines in perspective to create what seemed to be a second stage terminated by an obviously painted cyclorama. In *The Queen of Spades* (1976), two scrim surfaces inclined toward each other, with a transparent opening into farther space. One of these surfaces, covered with projected drapery, functioned as a ceiling, the second as a raked floor, even though it was not congruent with the actual stage floor. I talk about this problematical matter in such detail in order to make it clear that I never forgot that a proscenium stage has a floor, a portal (that is, a proscenium arch), and ceiling, and that these are its only real elements—this is also why I always use them as my starting point. In the understanding of these three realities lies the secret of dramatic and production space.

I've always been an advocate of the proscenium stage because it is the most theatrical space available; moreover, the routine transformation of theatre into mere spectacle isn't readily possible in it. Although neither the National Theatre in Prague nor most European theatres are suitable places for experiment or for truly modern theatre—for a fully satisfying interplay of all components or essential progress in basic elements, like light and sound—one simply has to take their form into account and put new elements into old containers. Europe won't be tearing down its historic theatres, nor will it build new theatres in large numbers, and so we have to keep seeking new variations for the functions of old theatre space—at least until a new space is created, as I shall suggest.

Dramatic space has the same characteristics as a poetic image. Its inseparable property is the fictional space of an imaginary stage that reaches beyond the physical stage in all directions. Dramatic space is protean in its mutability of size and identity. Opposing this dynamic space, then, is the

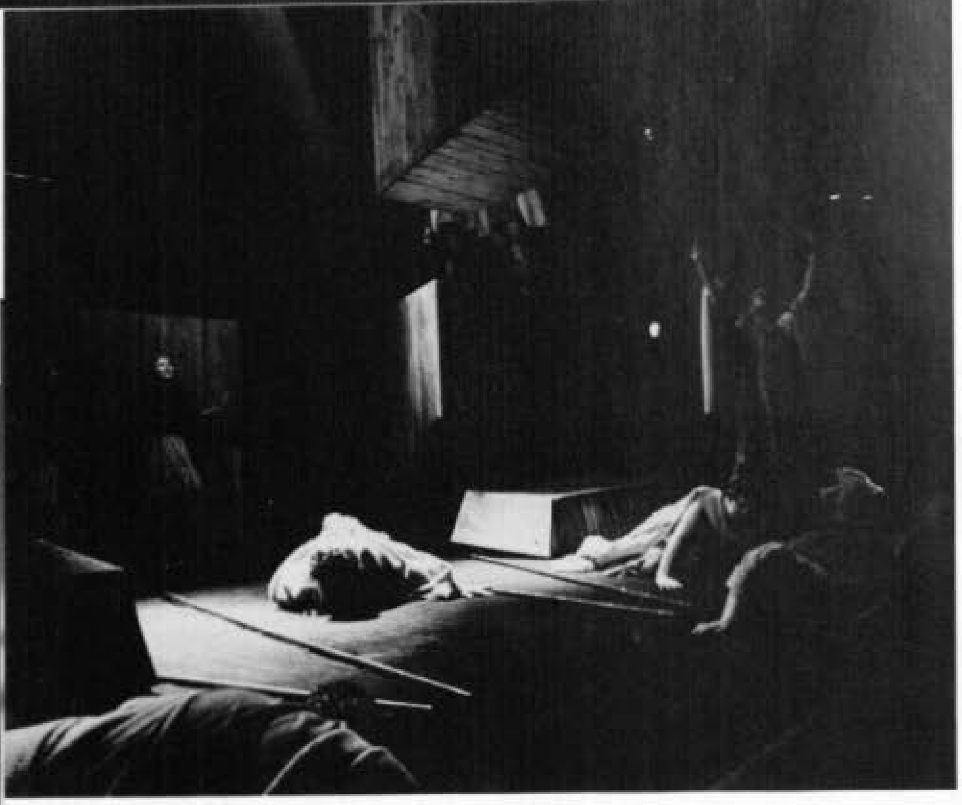


Photo: Jaromír Svoboda

Sophocles. Oedipus-Antigone.
Theatre Beyond the Gate, Prague, 1971.
Dir: Otomar Krejča.
The wooden cubes rode in on rails and were also suspended from overhead tracks.

actual, static theatre space, functional space, whose specific type is determined by the relation of stage and audience: proscenium space, central space, thrust space, variable space. So-called new types of space are merely imprecise reconstructions of historical prototypes—imprecise because of their almost inevitable placement indoors, if for no other reason.

Theatre space has been deprived of imaginative power, of an uninterrupted freeing of the spectator's fantasy. Should the border between stage and audience continue to be strictly maintained, or is it possible to do away with this division and situate the production within a single undivided space, in which—in extreme cases—there might be an indiscriminate mixing of actors and spectators? It seems to me we are constantly groping around a cursed concept, "theatre" space.

If a characteristic of theatre is the act of transformation, which converts a stage into a dramatic space, an actor into a dramatic character, and a visitor into a spectator, then even theatre space, architectonically speaking, must achieve a higher qualitative level and be transformed. After all, it's not a matter of theatre space, but of the space for a production, therefore production space, and that is fundamentally different from theatre space.

Theatre space is a familiar schema, to which a production is supposed to subordinate itself even at the cost of becoming deformed. And if we continue to be preoccupied merely with theatre space, we'll be solving something that in its very foundation is not concrete. We'll be trying to modernize an old architectonic type with new external elements, without ever touching the real heart of the problem. Production space, on the other hand, gets its dimensions from the dramatic work and its inner forces—time, rhythm, movement, suggestion, intangible energy. Though intangible, they are nevertheless real, in the way sound waves determine the curved contour of a concert hall.

Production space is a place of conflict, and the static nature of theatre, inherited from tradition, is no longer acceptable. Proscenium space is only one of the possible spatial configurations of production space, as the amphitheatre of antiquity or the Elizabethan theatre were other restrictive variants. That's why there are so many difficulties with Shakespearian texts, which, if put on our stages, undergo an act of forced deformation. Equally hard to solve is the problem of staging ancient or medieval drama, because our contemporary theatre admits only a few specific design approaches and their repetition in more or less novel variations.

An atelier-theatre, which, as I see it, I'll no longer succeed in building, would be an architectonically neutral space and would make possible a different relationship between audience and stage for every production. Its ground plan would be a rectangle, surrounded by galleries on several levels, connected in the corners by vertical communication systems. These galleries would have several functions; they would serve the technical operations of lighting and projections as well as the entrances of actors; and if the production were taking place on the entire stage floor level of production space, the galleries could be used to seat spectators. By moving these galleries along their transverse axes you could change the proportions of the rectangle of production space. Most of the spectators would be seated on mobile seating units, each one holding about one hundred people, which would move on cushions of air and be easily arranged around the performance areas and readily change their angle of seating. And all this could be done *during* the course of the play. If the nature of a given play required it, the collective seating modules could in fact be removed from the audience area with the spectators or without them and return again when needed. (Not to mention what an ideal security measure they would be in the event of a fire.)

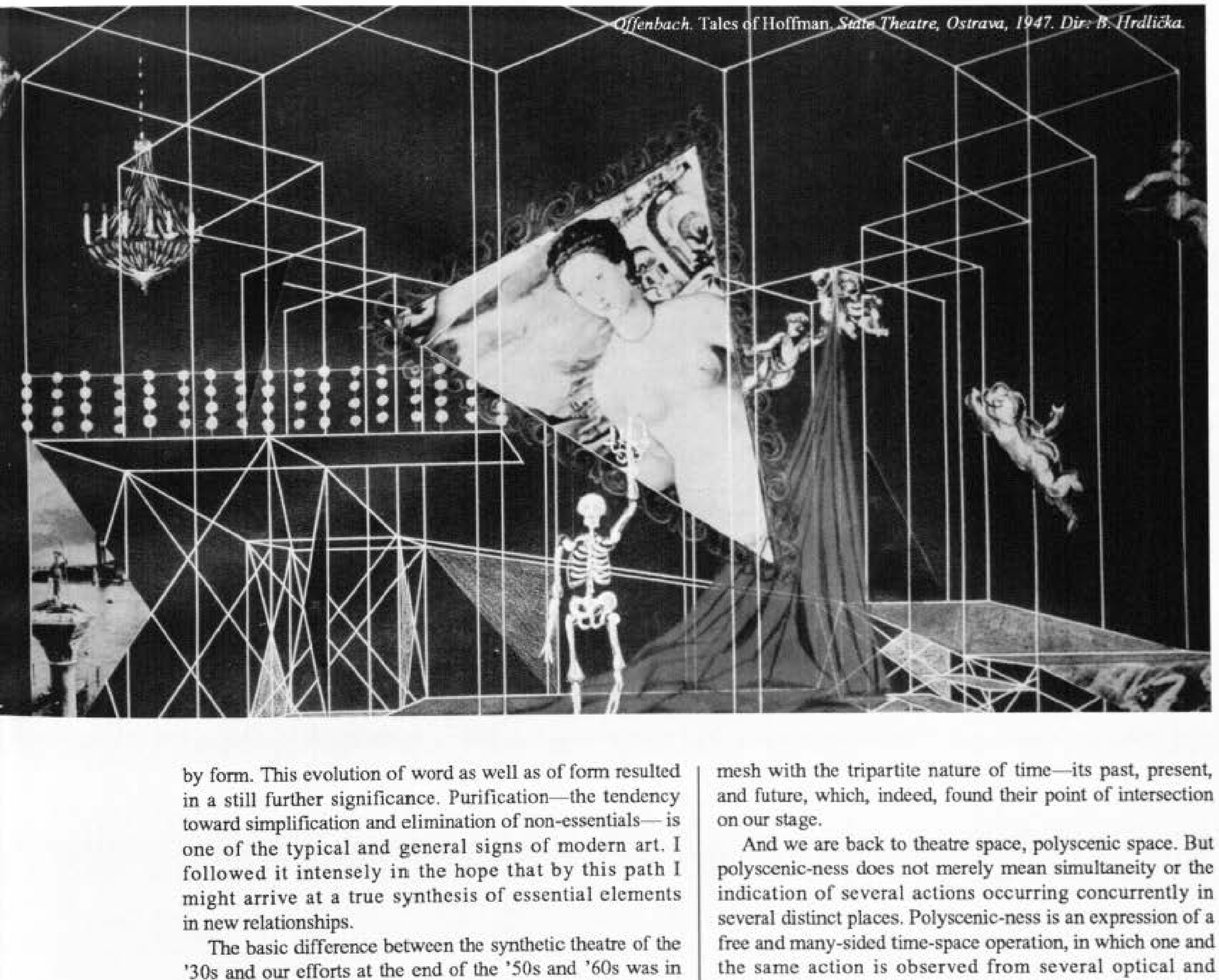
Even the foyer could be included as a parallel dramatic or supplemental space, by installing in it an exhibit of pictures relevant to the play being done, or by playing certain kinds of recorded music, and so on.

The fly space would be located in an optimal part of the production space. The proscenium towers and bridges would not be fixed, so that the proscenium portal could have a variety of forms and dimensions; it wouldn't always have to be parallel with a frontal axis; it could be eliminated entirely. The stage traps would also serve as elevators for transporting stage pallets for individual productions as well as for special pallets—for instance, a small pool, or a turntable. The stage traps would lead to special storage spaces which would be connected to the scenographic and costume shops in which the entire production would receive its finishing touches. Otherwise, the specialized theatre workshops, as well as the central storage spaces, would be located at sites other than the atelier. I would not complicate the stage floor with traditional heavy stage machinery; instead, I would make use of light, mechanized scenographic components.

Scenography makes sense only when it becomes an instrument in the hands of a director, when it becomes a space for inspiration, a kind of technical and design plaything. Production space should be a kind of piano, on which it is possible to improvise, to test out any idea whatever, or to experiment with the relationship among various components. Only so, by means of concrete experiment, is it possible for everyone's words and creative ideas to share the same objective reality.

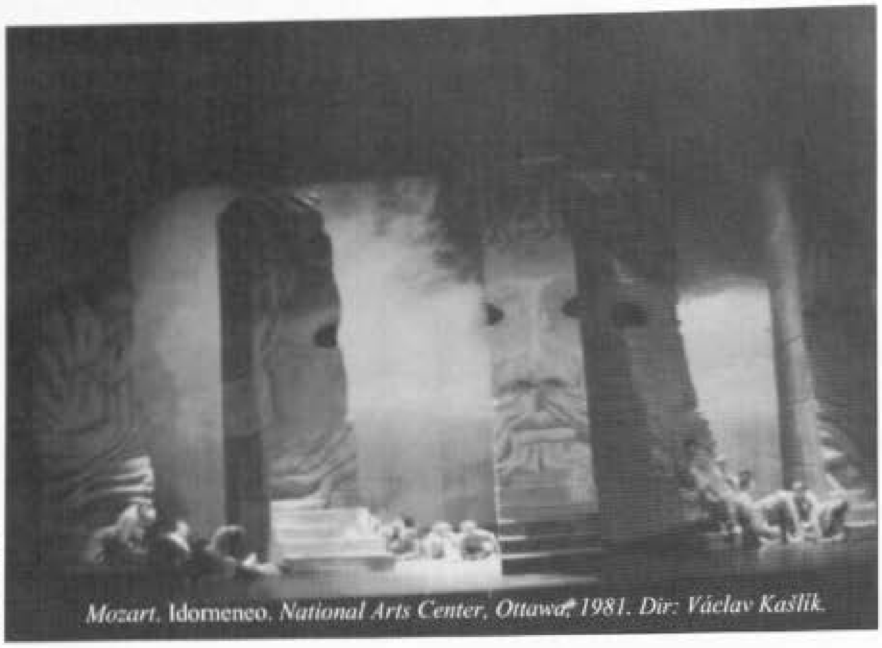
This new technology in the new studio ought not to flaunt itself. The spectator should be unaware of it, just as he is when watching a magician perform his magic.

And theatre *ought* to be a place of magic. Nothing from life can be transferred intact into the theatre; we must always create a theatrical reality and then fill it with the dynamics of life. In that principle lies one of the essences of modern art. There was a time when I considered Mallarmé's graphic poems and Apollinaire's calligraphy as mere games to fill empty hours. And yet they represented the highest possible efforts towards a purification of elements, towards a rejection of conventional expressive accretions, towards an artistic evolution in the direction of synthesis. These were precisely chosen, deliberate words revealing an economy suggesting that the words were to be carved in stone tablets but were instead broken up into letters arranged in a graphic pictorial layout. A picture confronted, completed, and heightened by words—or words heightened by form. This evolution of word as well as of form resulted in a still further significance. Purification—the tendency toward simplification and elimination of non-essentials— is one of the typical and general signs of modern art. I followed it intensely in the hope that by this path I might arrive at a true synthesis of essential elements in new relationships.


Offenbach. Tales of Hoffman, *State Theatre, Ostrava, 1947. Dir.: B. Hrdlička.*

The basic difference between the synthetic theatre of the '30s and our efforts at the end of the '50s and '60s was in fact right here: E.F. Burian, for example, wanted to achieve synthesis by erasing the boundaries between individual arts, to create a new homogeneous form from analytically dispersed elements. We, on the other hand, insisted on a purity of discrete elements, with their impressionistic union to be completed in the eye and mind of the spectators. Of course, every phenomenon—if it is not to be a mere static fact—must be observed in the flow of time. And time is expressed through change. Not mechanical change, but change as the flowing current of a lively imagination, like the clouds above a landscape that never acquire substance, never become a solid spatial form. Inspiration came from music, from Proust, and from Bergson. This special perception of change—as a fluid current—was taken as its own by the visual symphony of film, and taken as its own even by theatre. We, too, adopted this image of an unbroken stream, but we replaced its coherence with changeable and variously oriented layers so that its flow on the stage did not become monotonous, so that it could be modified in order to mesh with the tripartite nature of time—its past, present, and future, which, indeed, found their point of intersection on our stage.

And we are back to theatre space, polyscenic space. But polyscenic-ness does not merely mean simultaneity or the indication of several actions occurring concurrently in several distinct places. Polyscenic-ness is an expression of a free and many-sided time-space operation, in which one and the same action is observed from several optical and ideational angles which set cause and effect next to each other and take their measure. Polyscenic-ness means a visible joining and severing of these "axes," these relationships—a breaking up of the linear continuity of a theatre action, and its transformation into separate events or moments.



Mozart, Idomeneo. *National Arts Center, Ottawa, 1981. Dir: Václav Kašlík.*

Photo: Josef Svoboda

But any process, if it is to be perceivable, must be divided into definite, deliberate cycles with a precise rhythm. And so one day we found ourselves considering the problem of pauses, intermissions, breaks of whatever kind in the flow of action, which are as necessary in theatre as they are in music, where rests are as necessary as notes; rests are instruments of articulation in that they help organize and emphasize musical patterns. In theatre, if a pause has a precisely calculated length, it can heighten dramatic tension and become a dramatic fact. The effectiveness of pauses depends, of course, on their placement in the current of the action, and also on their frequency. Therefore, we carefully placed pauses where they would dramatically reinforce coherence. As a result, drama stopped being a condition and became a process. Time and rhythm acquired a precise, almost tangible quality. And I suddenly realized the true sense of Paul Klee's assertion: "Art should not picture the visible, but make the invisible visible, which means that it must translate the world into new pictorial laws or principles. Instead of the phenomenon of a tree, brook, or rose, we are more interested in revealing the growth, flow, and blossoming which takes place within them."

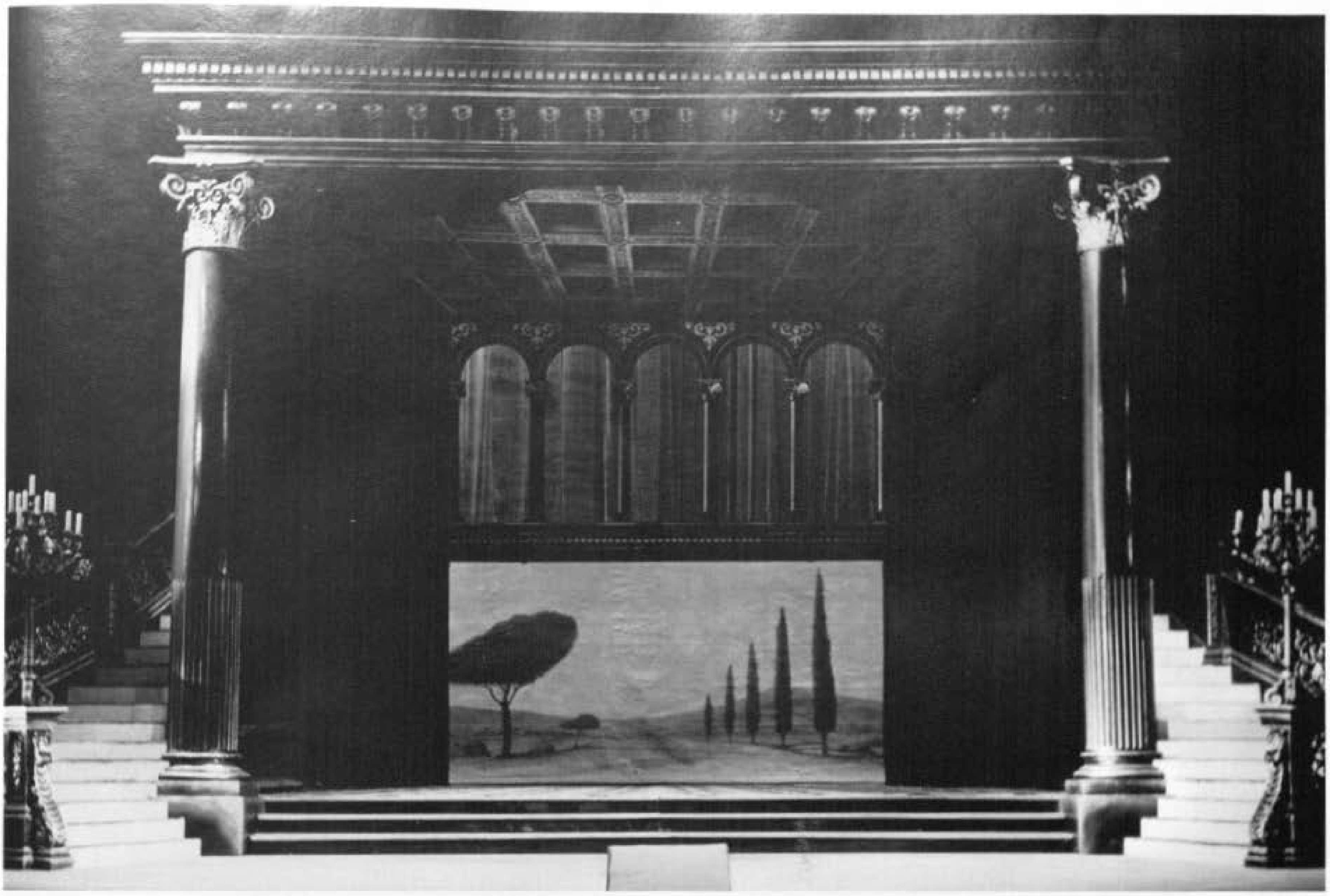
Klee's observation should apply to theatre as well, if it wants to be a valid art of the twentieth century. An effective rhythm of the dramatic process arises from alternating the complex and the simple, and in revealing the complexity beneath a simple surface. But all this would be pointless if this process weren't capable of resonating in the consciousness of the spectator. If we did not believe in this resonance and sense of identification between spectator and dramatic action, we would have to give up hope of even partially revealing what art is, and instead pursue mere cultural education. If our work is to have meaning, we must count on having an equal partner in our public. We depend on spectators to whom we don't have to explain the story of Romeo and Juliet, of Hamlet, because they all know it.

It's necessary, then, not merely to illustrate a literary text, but to transform it creatively into specific theatrical elements. It means adding to the triad of *Fact-Sign-Emotional convention* the direct joining of facts and emotional conventions, the expression of which we used to call a "ceremony," specifically, a familiar folk ceremony.

The goal of our creative work was always elementary theatre, nothing but the simplest of simplicities. Radok always rejuvenated ceremonies; he wanted to create new embodiments for them, which would be vital and communicable at any given moment. I recall, for example, how the maids in the *House of Bernarda Alba* (1967) scrubbed the floor and set up the chairs. They touched them and sat on them for a moment, the way people do when working. At that moment they were suddenly transformed into a still life in a portrait studio. The setting for this drama, in which even a bell and a voice were gestures, had to have a precise demarcation within the white walls of a black house. The walls didn't merely demonstrate that the house is isolated from the rest of the world; they played an important and active role in the acoustics of the performance. Acoustics must prove as malleable as spatial proportions or projected images. Steps and work noises were produced with great fidelity and precisely graded intensity. The sound of hate and dissension was captured in the crash of an ironbound wooden bucket against the wooden gate of the stable. Precisely at that moment the director suspended the dialogue and let the sound of the metal—this nonverbal "speech"—resonate to its end. He also used sound to reinforce the piercing of Martirio's palm by a needle in order to evoke an image of blood and hatred. The space had to provide a different "coloration" to the sound of the steps which walked the house at night, a different one to the singing of harvesters returning from the fields, and another to the sound of the people from the village.

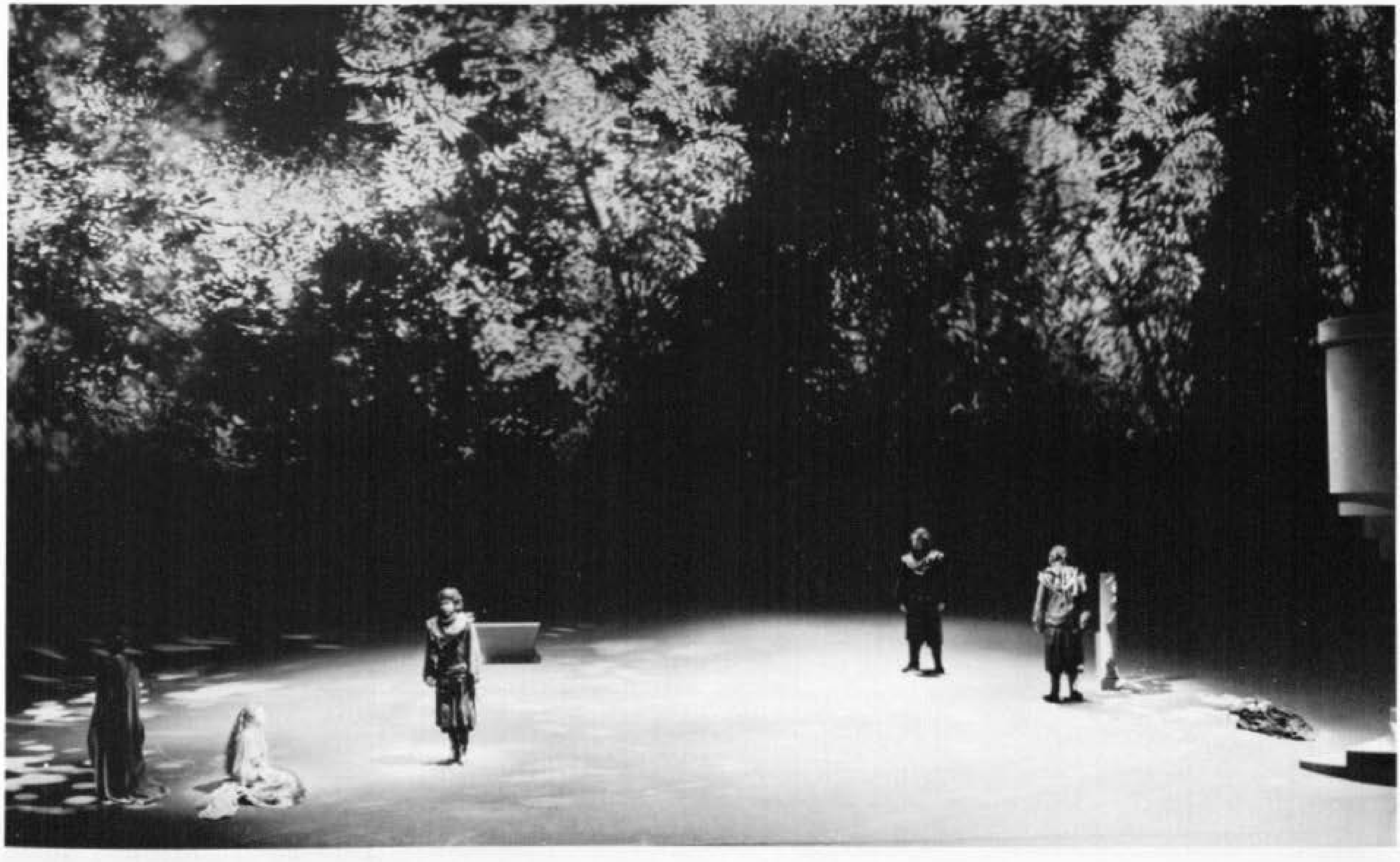
The walls could muffle and deflect every sound from their interior as well as intensify or emphasize disturbing sounds from without. With lighting, the walls could acquire an expressive texture or become instantly smooth. Interacting with lighting and the actor, they could create a particularly striking effect: a figure pressed against the wall and illuminated by increasingly intense rays of light falling next to her began to darken. When a white rectangle of light is projected onto a gray surface, the rest of the surface optically darkens. In *Bernarda Alba* I merely chose the opposite approach.

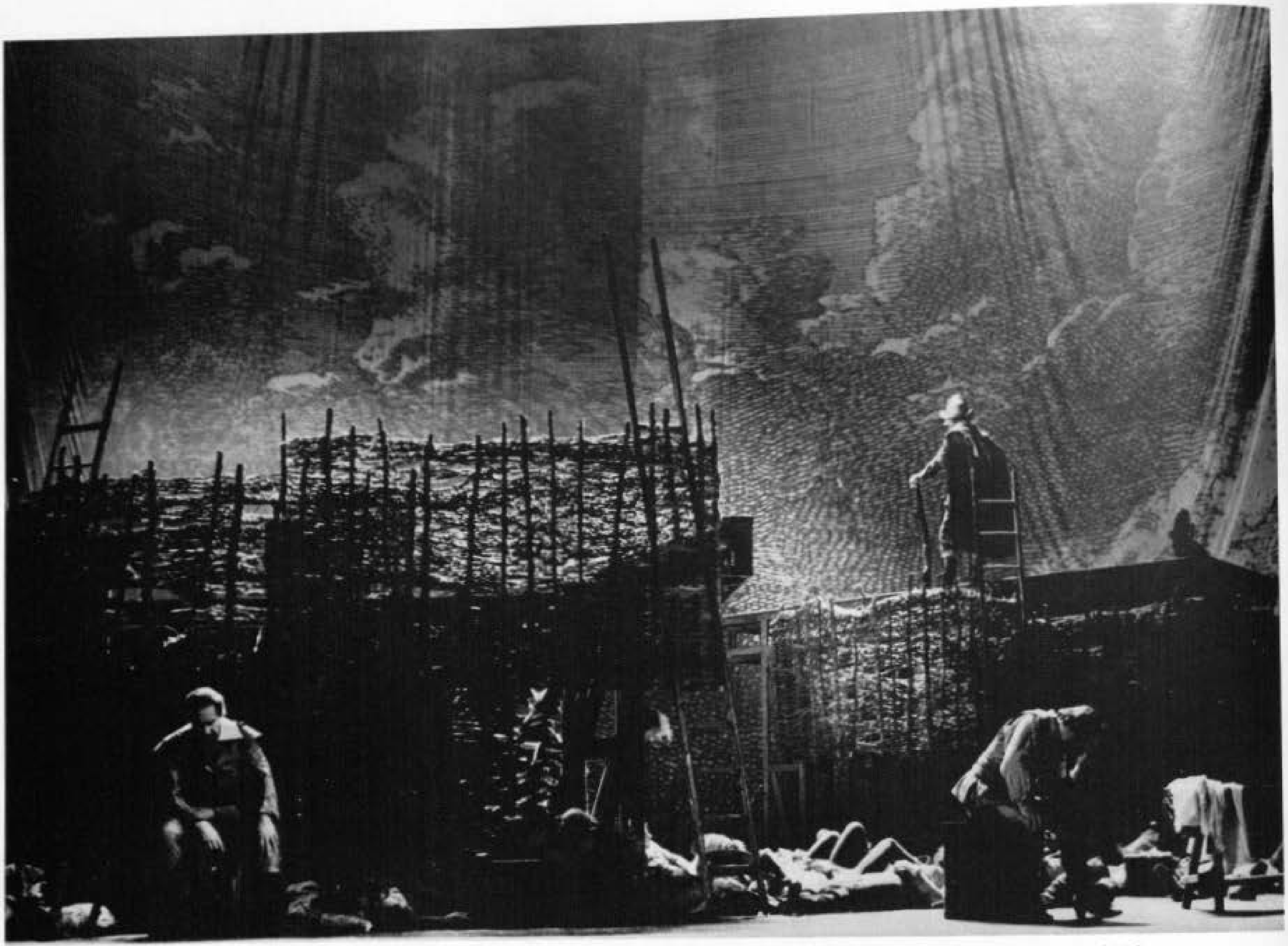
At other times, I was faced with the problem of moving large objects on stage. How to avoid having the orchestration of such movements seem mechanical, insufficiently variable, or merely repetitive even when they were fundamental and any changes would be impossible, unthinkable without them? The worst that can happen is the breakdown of available resources when you try to do too much at once: for example, projections, the movement of objects, plus the imposition of external details. It's always necessary to establish from the start a definite principle of restriction, to make the scenery and the furniture



Verdi. Rigoletto. *Smetana Theatre, Prague, 1954. Dir: Bohumil Hrdlička.*

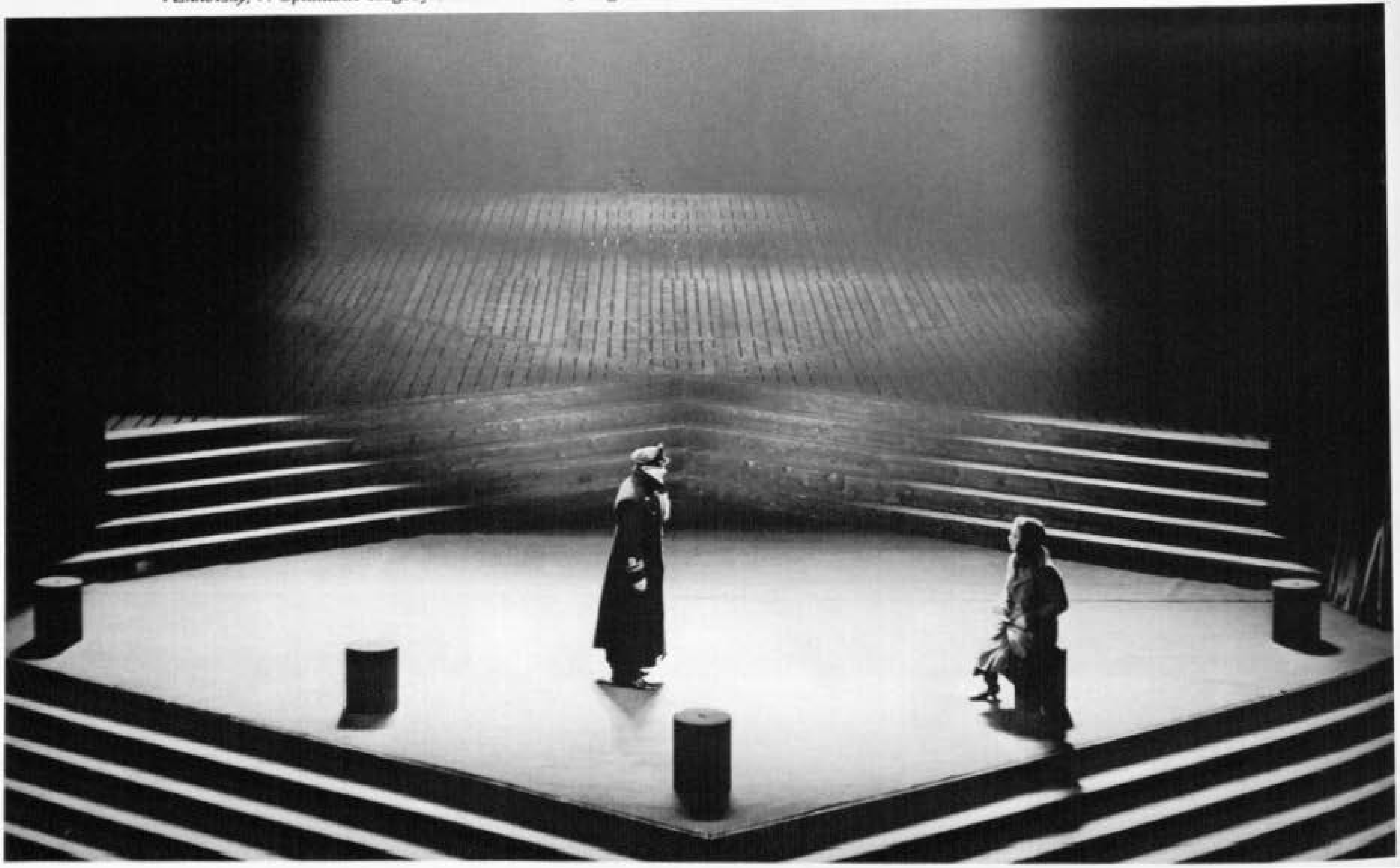
Wagner. Tristan and Isolde. *Grand Theatre, Geneva, 1978. Dir: Jean-Claude Riber.*





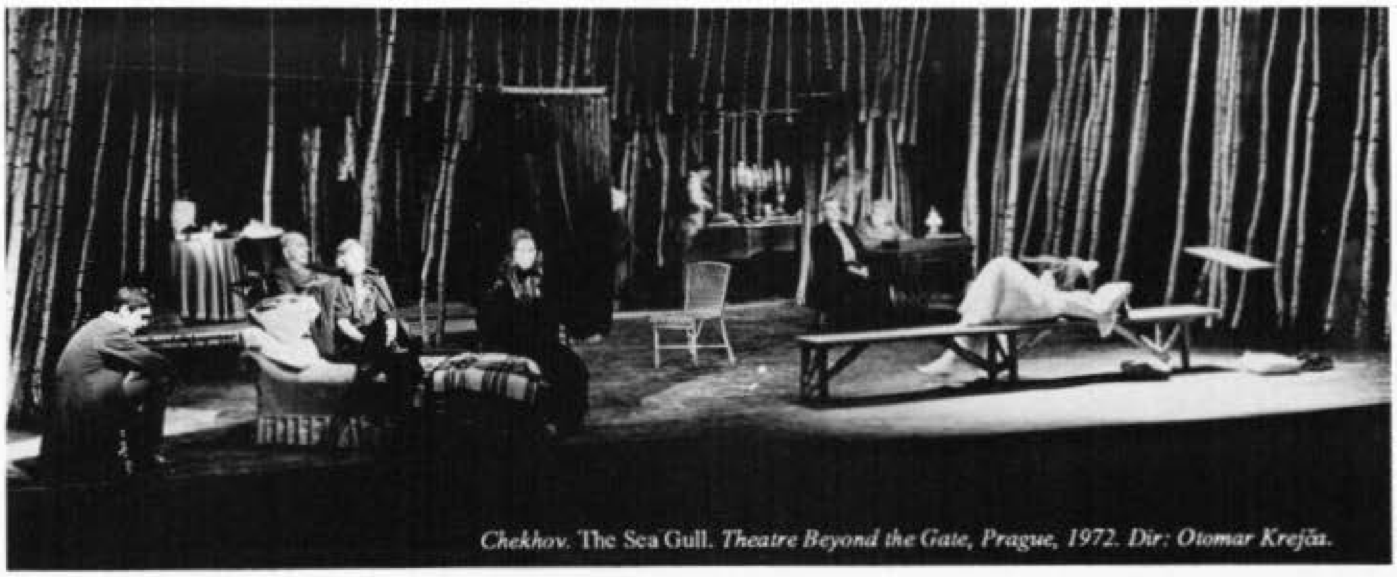
Rostand. Cyrano de Bergerac. *National Theatre, Prague, 1974. Dir: M. Macháček.*

Vishnevsky, V. Optimistic Tragedy. *National Theatre, Prague, 1975. Dir: M. Macháček.*



homogeneous elements, capable of disappearing at the right moment. It's also essential to weigh minutely the significance of the setting's every detail, which means starting with the detail and finally returning to reappraise it with the whole in mind. This is the only way to be certain that the whole is properly composed in its larger strokes.

I often begin with a simple drawing to capture an "image" of the scene with a mere few lines. The result is a caricature-like abbreviation, emphasizing the characteristic features of a scene. Such a drawing will reveal the excessive details that can infiltrate a dramatic production. And it's just this abundance and excessiveness that you must guard against, whether its source is the author's stage directions, the director's concept, or the producer's bias. You mustn't merely fulfill commissions and try to please. You must stubbornly search for what all the elements have in common, what is possible to unify in an eloquent but still single form. Of course, I am writing of that stage of my work which would be impossible without the prior experiences with Laterna Magika. (See chapter on "Laterna Magika.")



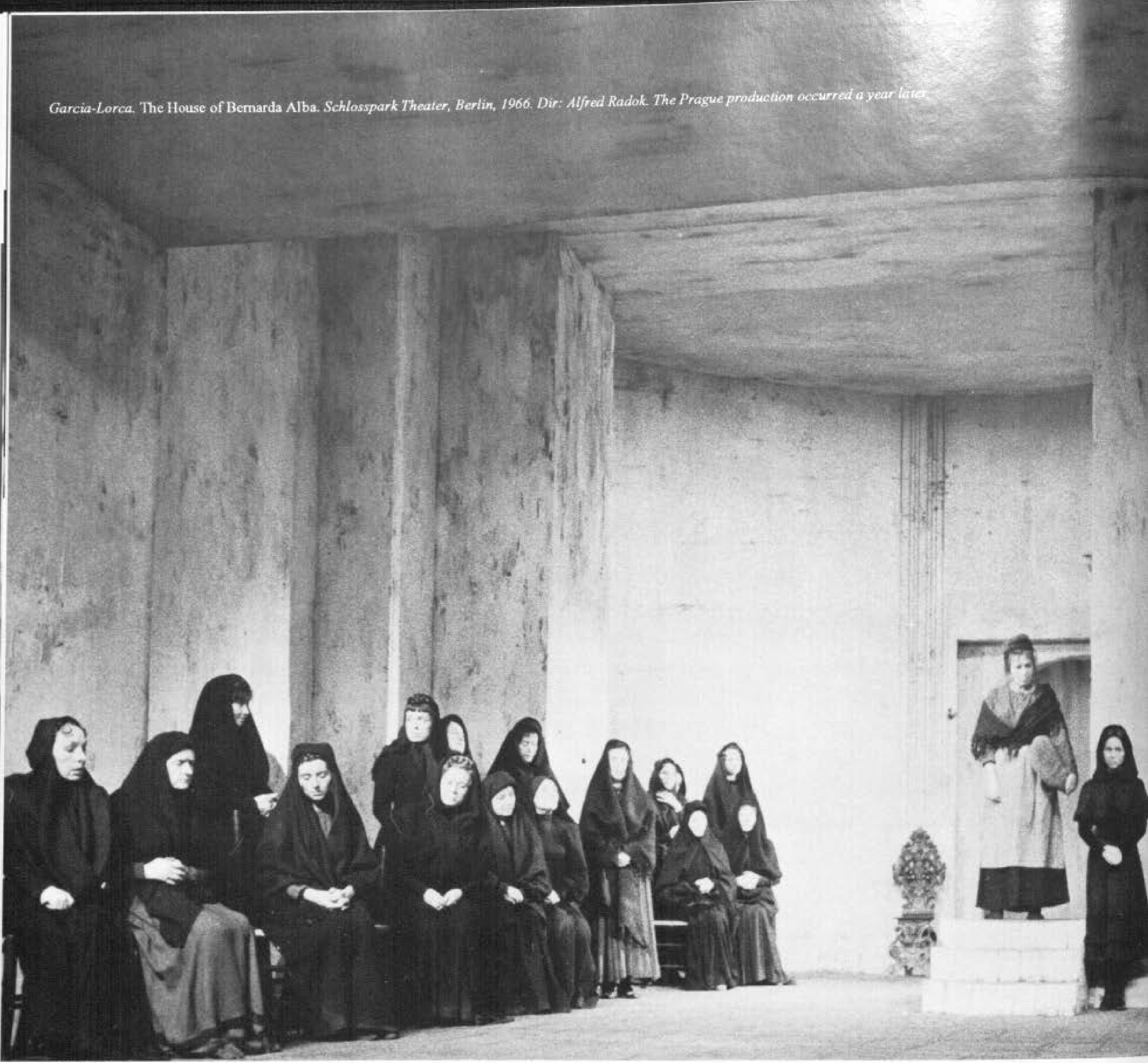
Chekhov. The Sea Gull. *Theatre Beyond the Gate, Prague, 1972. Dir: Otomar Krejča.*

Photo: Jaromír Svoboda

Experiment in the theatre is the same as intervention into a living organism. Such experiment or intervention never occurs in the isolation of a single element. It prompts movement in the entire structure, and the reaction and its extent are unpredictable. The start of one of my experiments was the idea of a rubbery imitation of grillwork; the end was the reality of a wall that could be walked through, composed of droplets of water. Intermediate steps involved experiments with gas and a screen of light. A logical evolution led from one step to the other almost according to physical laws, but an unexpected by-product appeared: a black floor began to look gray under intense light, which in turn prompted the need to create a grate-like surface to restore its black appearance. That led to lighting from below, but lighting from below resulted in a problem of reflection... Something like a chain reaction begins, in which everything shifts, new relations are created, new forms of the most varied elements. Such chain reactions can even lead to a paradoxical situation in which suddenly and unexpectedly a quality emerges that was seemingly negated by this spontaneous process. In theatre no one has, nor will ever have, the luxury of testing his experiment safely in a laboratory where it is possible to undo mistakes. Before the war, experiments occurred mostly in small semi-professional theatres, in front of an audience prepared for experiments. Only from there were such experiments, already tested, adopted into the established theatres. After the war, it was the complete opposite: experiments took place on the large stage of the Theatre of the Fifth of May and then in the National Theatre; only afterward did they travel to provincial theatres, often, unfortunately, as foolish imitations irrelevant to the plays at hand. Contrary to all rules, quality changed into quantity.

There was a fashionable wave of multiple projection screens and curtains of light, of shadow images behind proscenium arches spanned with scrim, of blue triangles on the cyclorama or stairs cutting through the stage floor to lead into the orchestra pit, as if Vlastislav Hofman hadn't already given stairs a definitively precise spatial form and a precise dramatic function. Then various constructions of raw wood took the place of stairs. Fashion or modishness simply doesn't have a logical evolution; perhaps it doesn't have any evolution at all. It has no goal in the future; it's a mere shifting of tastes. But the vagaries of fashion can never be an argument against experiment, because they are two completely different phenomena.

The postwar period has had an opposite evolutionary direction from the past. Postwar scenic experiment correlated with the condition and potential of technology existing outside the theatre. It could grow only from a strong economic foundation, from a wide circle of collaborators and from financial security, which enabled experiment to achieve at least a relative degree of definition and finish. In short, experiment today requires more than paper, burlap, paints, a ladder, and enthusiasm unsupported by knowledge and exactness. Traces of dilettantism must also be eliminated from the final form because the technical element of experiment, like a sudden burst of light, reveals



Garcia-Lorca. The House of Bernarda Alba. *Schlosspark Theater, Berlin, 1966. Dir: Alfred Radok. The Prague production occurred a year later.*

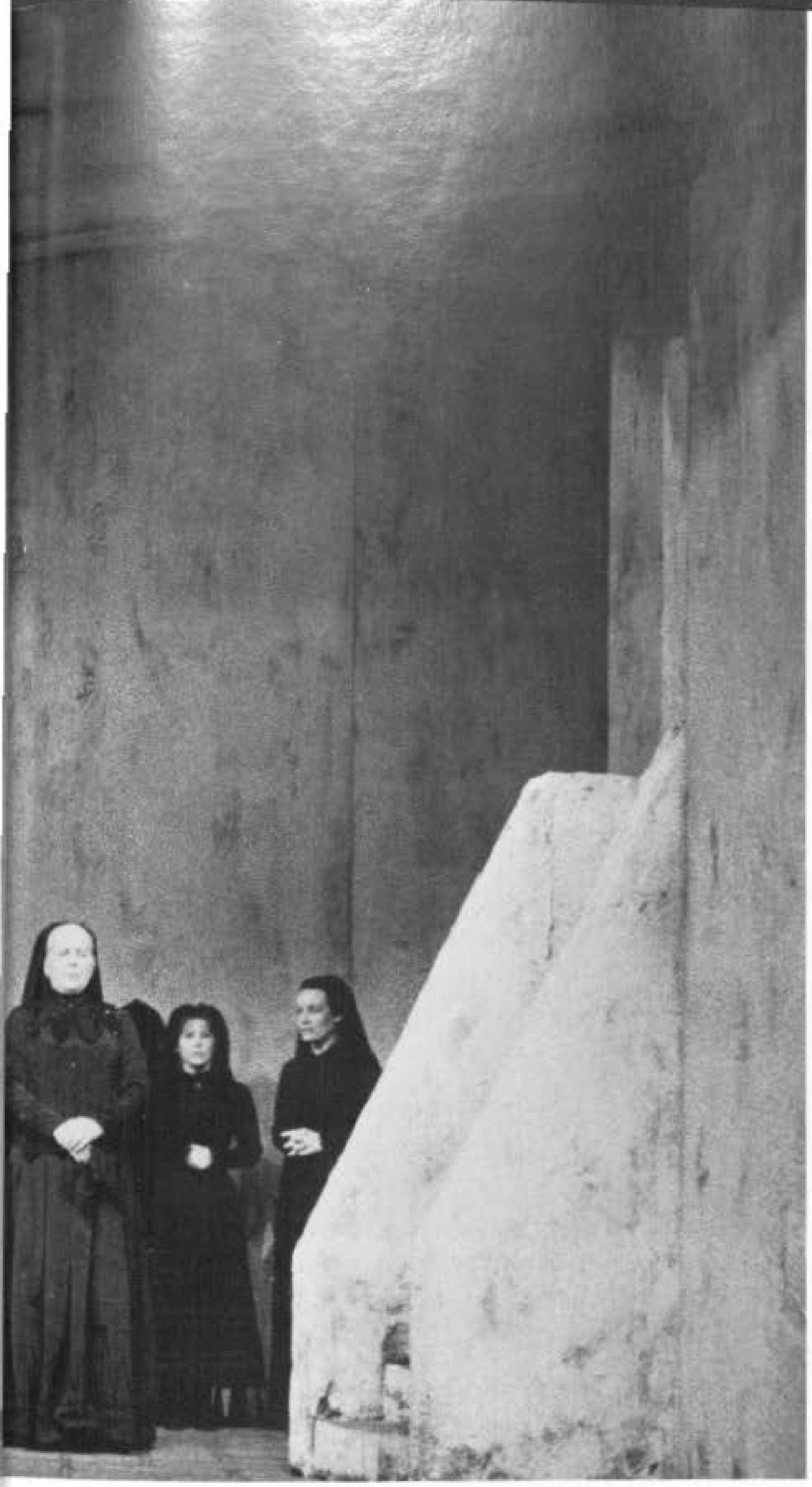
Photo: Ilse Buhs

every imperfection and lack of precision.

Yet, despite all these basic requirements, our theatre at home lacks the basic investment principles for any sort of experiment. Everything I've ever done has in fact been borrowed from exhibitions, prolonging the exhibitions' short-term investments into theatrical life. That's why I worked on Laterna Magika and on Polyekran. I could never have actualized either on a theatre budget. But as soon as exhibitions themselves became repetitious I stopped doing them. As far as Laterna Magika is concerned, we try to squeeze the most from what we have, but unless someone in authority realizes that it's impossible to keep this sort of operation running for thirty years on the basis of its initial outfitting, we'll be forced to end even Laterna Magika.[3]

Scenography has always lived from borrowings, which isn't so bad. What's worse is that it still lacks a basic registration of its resources, something which is routine in technology and which Bertolt Brecht strove for in his day. A registration, which would certainly not lead to a stylistic norm, would bring into scenography a sense of system, which always goes hand in hand with economy—economy not only in terms of finances but also time; above all, however, in terms of artistic effect, of quality. Filmmakers and television workers immediately grasp every technical improvement; they count on it. As soon as it became possible, they started to work with color, stereophonic sound, wide angle images, and montage effects. Meanwhile, in the theatre, we have a constant, inexplicable confusion of technical elements with artistic elements. Stage designers are forced into a never-ending process of discovery and simultaneous suppression of their discoveries. Why? Merely to satisfy contemporary demands for "art" and originality at any price. No one seems to realize that such an unending process, at a minimum, limits the possibility of thinking through any experiment and giving it systematic validity.

Of course, every new technical element represents only a fragment of the technical foundation needed by all



scenographers. People, presumably in the interest of theatre, take up arms against its industrialization, to which experiment allegedly leads. No one speaks of a fear of theatrical dilettantism! But it is impossible for theatre to remain totally behind in technical advancements without becoming a museum.

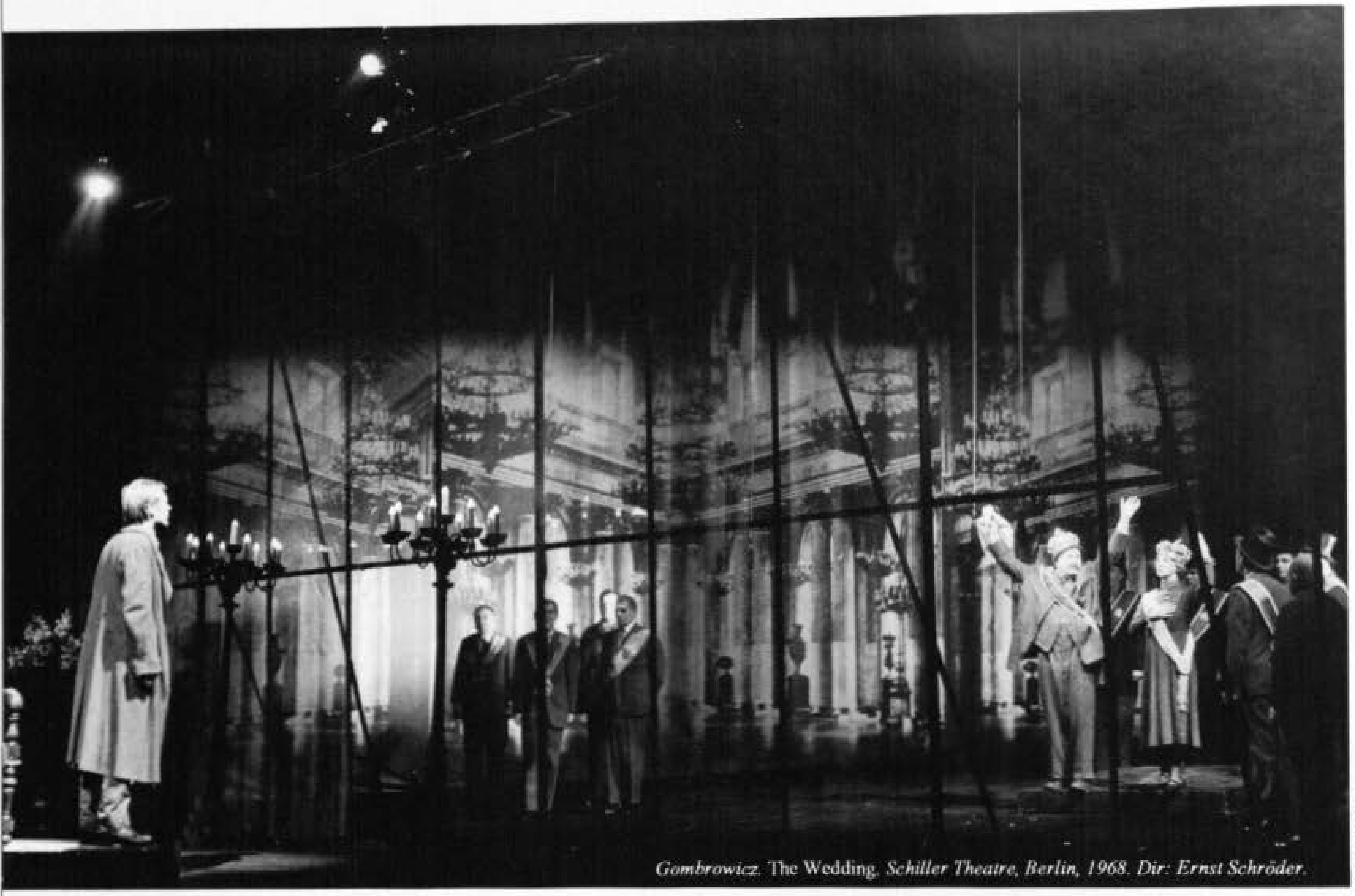
What is the source of the conflicting attitudes regarding technology and its function in theatre? Most people see technology only in terms of machinery. I went through this phase myself. In its essence, however, theatre technology is active and capable of dramatic action, even when that technology is "non-technical." In fact, I've come to the conclusion that technology can even be intangible, as it was, for example, in the production of Gombrowicz's *The Wedding* (1968). Its changes of locale, their thorough-going transformation, could never be accomplished by theatrical machinery—traps, flies, turntables, moving belts, and wagons. For the required dream-like distortion of reality I used glass walls placed at a diagonal on the stage. At certain moments the wall became transparent, at other times it functioned as a mirror or as a projection surface on which a character would see himself, his own image evoked by memories and the way he imagined himself to be. The interplay of these three elements—the glass wall, its almost imperceptible movement, and light—obviated any need for a separate abstract image to communicate an impression of space.

The greatest problem of a mirror on stage is to be there when it's needed, and disappear once it fulfills its task. The glass wall, which reflected a person, even made it possible to see behind the wall and also to project images which wiped out the mirroring effect.

No designer is subject to as much pressure and restriction as a scenographer. His fate is to wait. He does not have the possibility of free choice as a painter or sculptor does. A theme is simply given to him and he must subordinate himself to it. It's like pressure from opposing directions: the ideas that he wants to embody, and the ideas that he must embody. If the aesthetic function dominates in most design areas, in stage design it takes second place to practical function, to serving the play and the actors, serving the overall dramatic quality. And at the same time, the scenographer must be preparing himself for his future work; he can't allow himself to wait to solve problems until the moment he is thrust before them.

The relation between direction and scenography is extraordinarily important; more precisely, between the director and the scenographer. I always try to take into account all the human characteristics of my partner, his inventiveness as well as his reactions, if we come to a conflict of attitudes or opinions. Collaboration usually involves two contrasting phases: the work on the production and the climate after its conclusion. A production appears before the public as a fact to be responded to in and of itself, without regard to its past, its possibility of further development, or the separate contributions of its creators. If we are not aware of the evolution of a production, how can we recognize where the work of one creative component ends and where the work of another begins, where one exceeds the other, where direction penetrates into scenography and the opposite?

In the first phase of a collaboration there has to be a mutual interest in the production, a desire to give it one's best. In the second phase human nature begins to dominate, and sometimes a director may perhaps even decide to do without scenography in the next production. Working for so many years in the theatre, I've come to view this cycle as a necessity, so as to be able to explain the waves which alternate between an emphasis on scenography and its suppression. These waves repeat themselves almost regularly, and their reasons don't really change very much. They include a certain inner movement within art, as well an inner movement of human, social tendencies to which art is exposed. In 1948 we worked out the question of the relation of scenography and direction for the first time, at the end of the '50s for the second time, at the end of the '60s for the third time. The issue emerges with almost mathematical regularity every ten years. The reasons need not be merely feelings of competition, but also a



Gombrowicz. The Wedding. *Schiller Theatre, Berlin, 1968. Dir: Ernst Schröder.*

Photo: Josef Svoboda

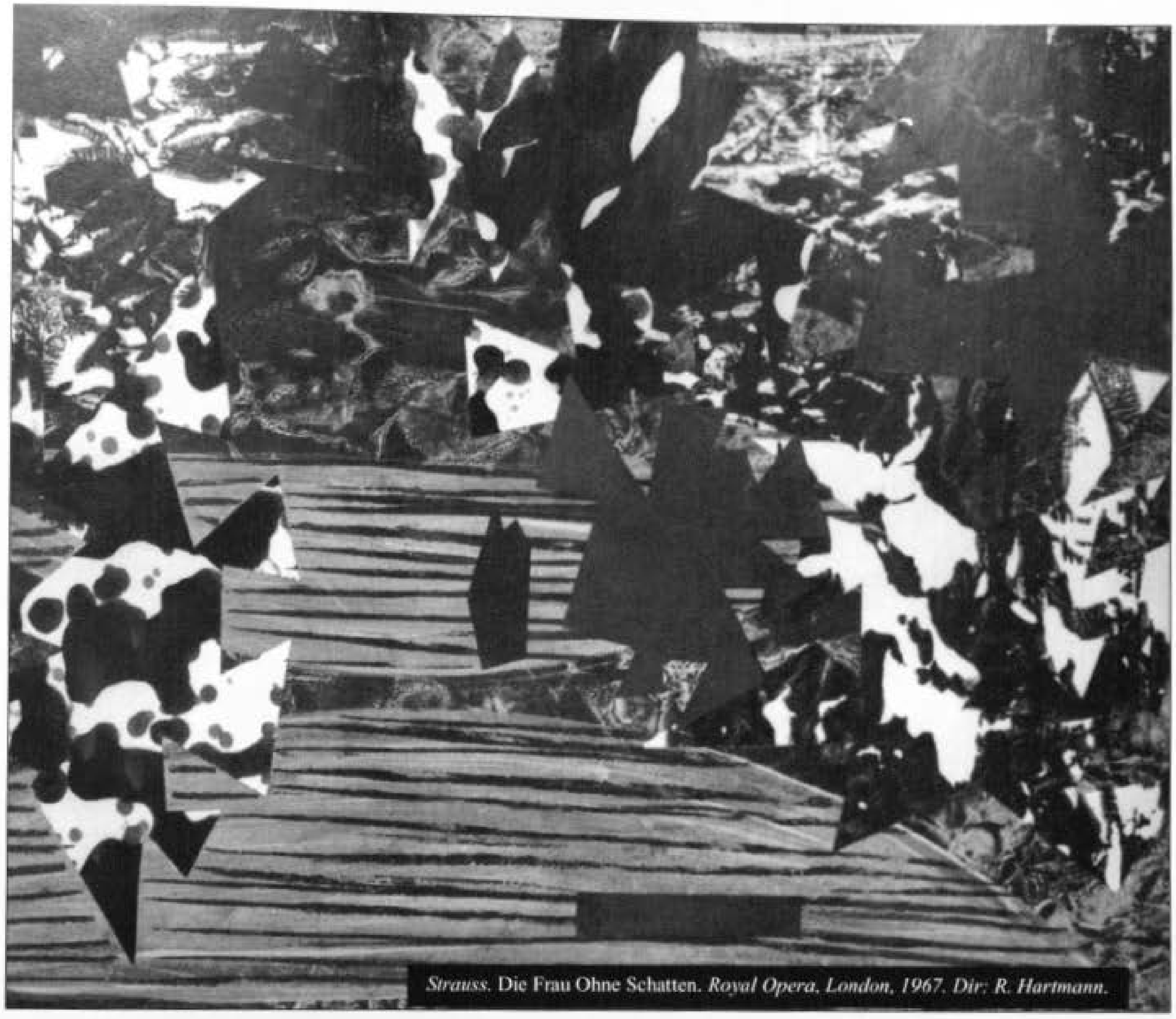
subconscious need to create a truthful accounting of results, to audit the mutual relations among individual components with an eye to their further potential, and to orient oneself in the evolution to come.

It can even come to a denial of scenography—theoretically—not in practice, unless theatre for some incomprehensible reason wishes to self-destruct. It's enough to think of one good example, say from Orson Welles' *The Trial*: a huge waiting room in a railroad station, and somewhere in the middle of it a desk and chair. An office. I challenge anyone to express this atmosphere, its basic feeling, as immediately, concentratedly, and essentially by any means other than those of a stage setting. Any means other than those of scenography simply don't exist.

And still another conceptual point: if a given work is to contain diametrically opposing and uninterchangeable thematic elements, a way must still be found to join such elements at a deeper level. For a production of Richard Strauss's *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* at Covent Garden in 1967, I made thirty scenic proposals, thirty illustrations of almost imperceptible and yet undeniably existing aesthetic laws. And somehow they all related to human nature, even though I wasn't fully aware of it. *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* is a fable of a person who sold her soul and with it her humanity. As in every fable, the world of good and the world of evil are thrust into direct contrast.

But what form and what color do good and evil have and how are they related? Just as I was searching for the right form and color for the scene, so its principles began forming almost on their own, without my interference and often against my will. Signs of duality appeared in my proposals sooner than I was able to realize their implications or define them. Finally, a whole emerged, a circle, broken into two parts which obviously belonged together even though they were placed so as to touch like two half-circles only at the midpoint of their circumference. It was a circle and a whole which ceased being a whole but became two separate parts without denying their mutual affinity. Then I proceeded to add stairs to these half-circles and created from them two acting areas that touched at a sharp angle—the kings' space and the space of Barak's workshop. The latter was placed under the lower slab and its interior was revealed when the lower segment lifted up. At the same time, this entire scenic construction was not a symbol, nor did it function as a symbol. In fact, it was merely a scrap of the play, a resonance of its idea cleansed of all details, something the play itself couldn't say in as elegant an abbreviation. It was something only a designer can express.

The play itself ended with this simplified image. But I still had a further, essential problem. Barak and his wife, rid of her shadow, stood confronting each other on a diagonal, because a spatial diagonal is optically the greatest achievable distance on a stage. And this distance was



Strauss. Die Frau Ohne Schatten. *Royal Opera, London, 1967. Dir: R. Hartmann.*

suddenly spanned by a shadow like a bridge across a chasm, like the touch of a hand. The spectator could see both the substance and the intangibility of a shadow which one could walk across. It used to be common practice to have a real bridge in this scene. I wanted a real shadow. But how to do it? If a character stood on a mirrored surface and was illuminated, the shadow would be lost. It would be a strange vision of the world, the kind one sees in a Van Gogh picture. And that was my starting point for solving the problem. But a mirrored stage floor ruled out any sort of projection, which I needed for my type of leaf-shaped projection screens. Moreover, a mirrored floor when illuminated would have been transformed into such a strong reflecting surface that the torrent of light would have flooded the entire stage. And on top of that, an entire mirrored floor made it impossible to lose and regain a shadow, which was understandably essential for the whole play. It didn't even allow for two people to stand next to each other and have one of them be shadowless. At the same time, the play of shadows had to be distinctive and actual; there was no room here for any sort of "let's pretend." The problem was like the dangerous reefs inherent in the dual roles of a designer and a director.

To create the first type of shadow (the "bridge"), it was enough to install a system of black venetian blind shutters in the risers of the stairs. But in addition to this gigantic shadow I needed an instrument which could instantly create an actual shadow and in another instant eliminate it. The only resource with this capability is light and the surface it strikes: a combination of diffused light from below a special flooring with strong, sharply aimed lighting above. The lower light, aimed up toward the fly space in which it disappeared without creating parasitic light or weakening the intensity of any projections, passed through a grating of black steel strips laid at right angles to each other, on whose sufficiently wide edges the actors were able to walk. The shadows cast by the upper light were caught on the vertical surfaces of the grating and could be wiped out at any moment by the light from below. In effect, a floor of this sort of grating cannot become gray from intensive lighting, as happened to me with the black carpet in Tyl's *Drahomira*; on the contrary, the greater the intensity of the lighting, the darker this floor became.

As far as the leaf-shaped screens were concerned, I had never realized how difficult it is to paint any abstract form other than a geometric one. A vegetative form always seems to suggest reality, even if that reality suggests something like a coral cliff or an amoeba. But a projected geometric image didn't blend well with a vegetative screen. The screen didn't give the projected image a form but was merely its passive carrier; it was covered and disappeared under it. The most we had was a contact but never an interplay of deliberately shaped surfaces, even though a vegetative screen actually facilitates a spatial interplay. With these screens I was also able to verify some elementary rules of design for the stage, such as the interaction of colored abstract composition on a textured surface.

All my life I've asked myself questions: Why is it necessary to project only onto solid surfaces and not onto a mobile cluster of lines, on fragmentary

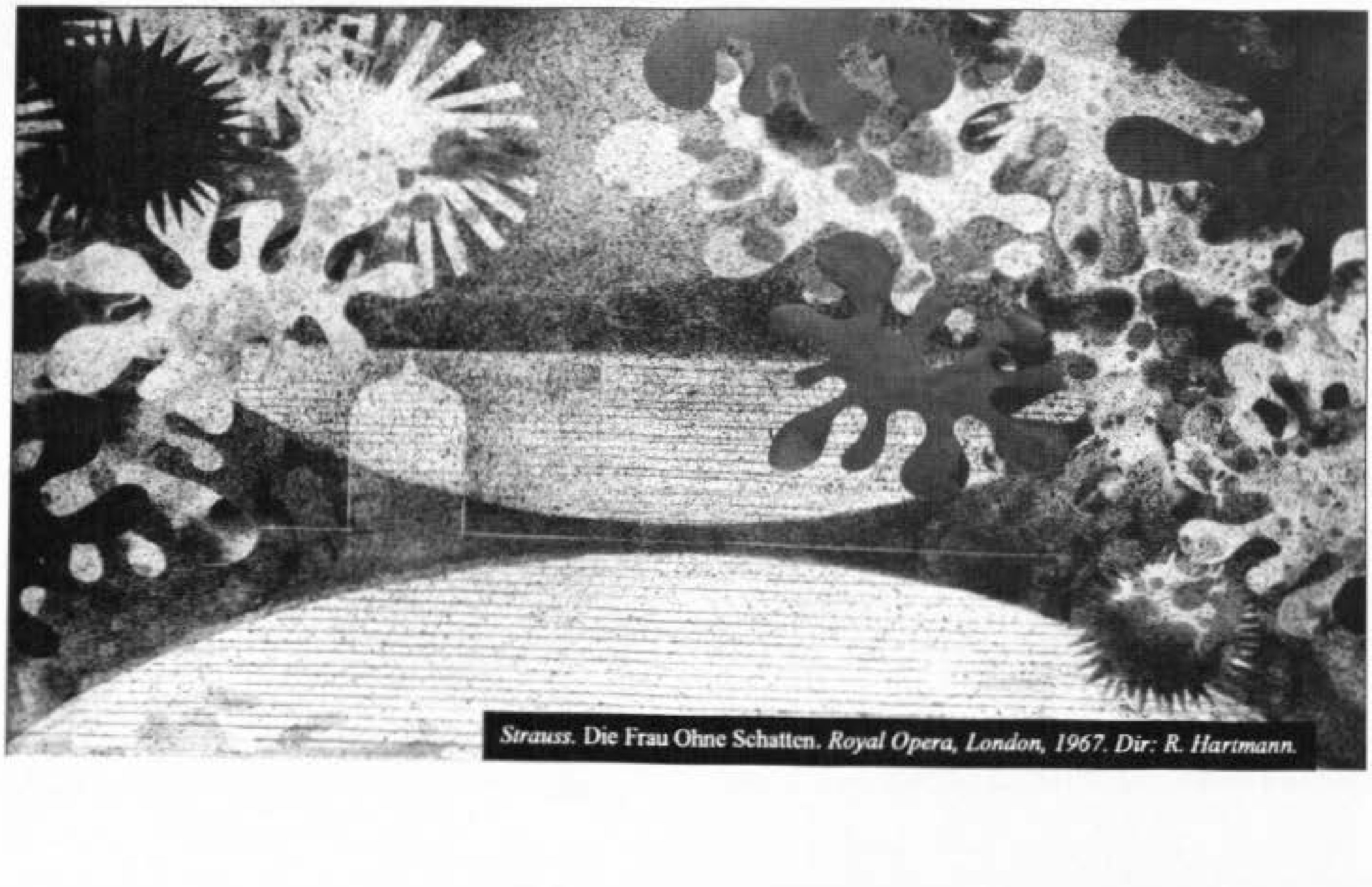
Svoboda adjusts his model for Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream *(National Theatre, Prague, 1963. Dir: V. Špidla) at an exhibition of his work at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in 1981.*

surfaces, or on sticks or rods? Why isn't it possible to introduce light into their layers as well as onto their surface? I experimented with the possibility of the permeability of two projected images which intersected in space, struck each other at a right angle, and one literally penetrated the other. I tested further possibilities of additive colored lighting. I attempted to construct a light-absorbing device. I have spent my life searching for new and newer solutions and progressively revealed their possibilities and limitations. Let me repeat that a scenographer mustn't allow himself to solve tasks only at the moment he is standing in front of them; they will surely outrun his unprepared thinking and knowledge. I simply don't believe in genius that can instantly adapt to any problem whatever.

I do believe in the results of an ability to perceive events and activity around one, in the ability to gather within oneself the most varied information and stimuli and to use them at the appropriate moment. Moreover, I'm convinced that no problems can be handled by merely walking around their edges; it is necessary to penetrate to their essence even at the cost of temporary destruction or negation, which may even be a necessary antipole and consequence of any attempt to configurate space.

I have in mind an empty stage. (I am convinced that it's always necessary to start from that which is normally thought to be nothing, because that sort of "nothing" on stage simply doesn't exist.) Stage space is a fact that exists in and of itself prior to the play and outside the play. And perhaps that is the fundamental problem: to make of that space an empty space. It's far more difficult than erecting a normal setting. And then, to make an empty space, perhaps a blue space. Nothing more. I emphasize "to make" because it's possible to take a board and cover it with black paint, but it's also possible to take that same board and make of it a painting which will be called "Black Paint." It's exactly the same with space. Color is a reality and space is a reality, and it is doubly so with dramatic space.

And so, indeed, I have always kept returning, searching, and disputing with myself; there have been but very few brief moments when I have had the feeling that I knew something precisely. But one thing I truly know well: the stage is an instrument, as perfect an instrument as a piano. An instrument on which it is possible to play Chopin, and the stars will fall from the heavens; or Beethoven, and grief will acquire form and substance; or Mahler, or Orff, or Gershwin. On stage it is possible to play anything. And play it beautifully.



Strauss. Die Frau Ohne Schatten. *Royal Opera, London, 1967. Dir: R. Hartmann.*

Opposite: Janáček. The Voyages of Mr. Brouček *National Theatre, Prague, 1959.*
Photo: Jaromír Svoboda