

SCENOGRAPHERS MALINA AND DUSEK AT WORK IN TODAY'S CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Designing for the 90s

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■ The work of Czech scenographers Jaroslav Malina and Jan Dusek reflects an attempt to create a more expressive theatre environment in reaction to the repressive society created by the Soviet invasion of their homeland in 1968. (left, Dusek's design for *Threepenny Opera*, 1987)

● *L'oeuvre des scénographes tchèques, Jaroslav Malina et Jan Dusek, reflète une tentative de créer un environnement théâtral plus expressif, ceci en réaction à la société répressive issue de l'invasion soviétique de leur patrie en 1968 (à gauche, maquette de Dusek pour Threepenny Opera, 1987).*

▼ Die Arbeit der tschechischen Bühnenbildner Jaroslav Malina und Jan Dusek stellt den Versuch dar, auf die repressive Gesellschaft, die durch die sowjetische invasion ihres Heimatlandes 1968 entstanden ist, mit einem ausdrucksstärkeren Umfeld auf dem Theater zu reagieren. (links, Duseks Entwurf für die *Threepenny Opera*, 1987)

Scenography has been esteemed as a significant element of theatre in Czechoslovakia for most of the 20th century. Since the late 1950s, it has been associated with the work of Josef Svoboda and, to a lesser degree, Ladislav Vychodil. Both of these senior artists are still active, but younger generations have been making their mark as well. These younger designers reflect broader movements and changes in theatre practice within Czechoslovakia as well as in the world beyond its borders.

The history of Czech scenography can be divided into two eras, delineated by the 1968 Soviet invasion. Those designers who reached artistic maturity before the 1960s saw their craft as an art which, while part of a theatre event, could also be appreciated for its own values of line, colour, pattern, and individual statement.

As the 60s ended, Czech theatre underwent a radical change. Not only was the basic repertoire curtailed to safe classics or works of neo-socialist realism, but staging practices also reverted toward a neo-conservatism. Reacting to this tendency, theatre artists who were not tied to the mainstream of institutionalized repertory theatres deliberately pulled back to the most basic, human-centered elements of theatre, as if rejecting the officially sanctioned forms associated with a repressive political and cultural system. Those Czechoslovakian theatre artists, including stage designers, who did not begin their careers until the late 60s are more likely to think of their work as an opportunity — using socially relevant motifs — to create intimate contact with their audience.

Needless to say, the work of this group of younger stage designers also reflected movements in theatre and art beyond the boundaries of Czechoslovakia during the 60s. Happenings, environmental theatre, pop art, found art, and Grotowski's "poor" theatre all contributed to influence a worldwide shift in scenography away from large scale spectacle and complex technology. The move was toward simpler, non-technological methods of staging in which the actor would dominate and traditional scenography would either be eliminated or become minimal.

It is in this context that two Czech scenographers, Jaroslav Malina and Jan Dusek, worked.