LATERNA MAGIKA

INTRODUCTION

The name itself until recently evoked only a memory of a favorite toy or of the oldest attempts at projecting pictures. Since 1958, with the first performance of the Laterna Magika in the Czechoslovak pavilion at the Brussels World’s Fair, it has meant a performance in which film, theatre, and the dialogue between the two media are used as equal components.

The Brussels program, and the later touring program [which went to New York] used poetry, statistics, live and filmed dancers, live and recorded music, still projections, and live and filmed actors, all with a sense of life that came from the ability to see reality from several angles, on several time levels, connecting images which cannot be joined in our limited “real” world. These two programs were basically revues, emphasizing three themes interchangeably: present-day Czech life, Czech and Slovak folk songs and dances, and a romantic and ironic comedy created by montage and various technical tricks.

The technical units used on the tours consisted of two practically independent sections, one for the stage and one for projection. The stage unit was a complex construction of ten or more mobile projection screens in various sizes and shapes, two moving belts, a curtain, and stereo equipment. It was assembled directly on the stage, and could also, less conveniently, be used in halls which had no stage. The projection unit was a closed cabin with projectors, dia-projectors, and so on, entirely sound-proofed. The two units together weighed over 15,000 pounds, but could be assembled and dismantled within a few days.

From a pamphlet published by the Experimental Studio of the Czechoslovak State Film Industry, Prague.
JOSEF SVOBODA: FROM AN INTERVIEW

Perhaps it threatens to compromise the mise-en-scène, but if properly controlled the Laterna Magika technique is a wonderful artistic element. We see life differently today; our perception of reality has been accelerated. We do not look at a landscape as the nineteenth-century painters did, bit by bit and slowly, but as a rapid succession of images, like a movie. Yet theatre is not film or TV, though it may use them, for it must maintain an artistic space. The theatre cannot return to screen-like two-dimensional expression, but must seek the expansion and articulation of scenic space.

The film can only copy, but theatre always produces an impression of space which can be enlarged in many ways. The Laterna Magika is a theatrical synthesis of projected images and synchronized acting and staging. The set must be mechanically refined for the utmost flexibility in scenic space if it is to use filmic possibilities without being overwhelmed. The stage must be able to respond instantly to the progression of images, to produce the equivalent of the cinematic quick-cut; until now the most useful devices have been the conveyor belt and the trap, but our current scenic ideas are leading us to intensive study of screens, of the qualities and technical possibilities of the diffusion and direction of light, and their mechanical installation. Unfortunately, all of these attempts have been made in conventional theatre plants, which permit only a mere suggestion of the possibilities. In order for the Laterna Magika and multi-screen techniques to be fully explored, a special facility must be created.

It is interesting that “faithful reproduction” seems “natural” to us only when we work with man-made details. Attempts to imitate works of nature on the stage have never succeeded. Nature has its own rhythm. The tree quivers—it is a dynamic organism. That’s why a “naturalist” set is out of the question; you can’t copy nature so easily. Here is the frontier which the modern theatre is struggling to cross.

Translated by KELLY MORRIS from an interview in Le Théâtre en Tchécoslovaquie, Prague, 1962.

THE TALES OF HOFFMAN

After the Laterna Magika Brussels show and its touring program had been completed, the company began a period of experimentation, seeking its own peculiar field of effectiveness. The Tales of Hoffman, a complete musical and dramatic production conceived in Laterna Magika terms, was designed as a test to see whether we were capable of tackling the technical and artistic problems of a large-scale dramatic work. This was a prerequisite to our current plans to create an original contemporary work on the same scale—and it also is Laterna Magika’s contribution to contemporary ideas on opera production.
Offenbach left only a piano arrangement of the score plus a few instrumental numbers taken from some of his other works—the rest of the arrangement and orchestration has been done by various French and German composers since the first production in 1881, after Offenbach's death. We therefore felt justified in reworking the entire piece. All descriptive detail was weeded out of the story and the production, stripping it down to its basic poetry, fantasy, and human relationships. The orchestra and conductor were not visible to the audience.

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The Scenario

A mistress of ceremonies introduces a young and naïve poet, Hoffmann, in whose imagination a door opens to the home of the inventor Spalanzani. Spalanzani, a cripple, has created a dancing doll, Olympia, who reflects an equally mechanical Parisian society, with its stylized motions, Daumier-like masks, vanity and vacuity. Throughout the play—though only on the screens, as imagined by Hoffmann—Spalanzani re-appears in several demonic forms. In the first episode he is Coppelius, an agent and optician who deals in everything from human eyes and human illusions to war and lives; he sells Hoffmann eyeglasses through which Olympia appears human, and Hoffmann dances with her. This episode is done in a setting of fantastic instruments, gauges, ticking clocks, mirrors, chandeliers. The doll Olympia is then smashed to pieces.
In the second episode, Hoffmann finds his love, Antonia. The entire episode is in ascetic black and white film, with the love scenes uncluttered by projections, decor, or any but the most necessary props. In contrast, Hoffmann's hypnotic dream about the quack, Doctor Miracle, blends stage and back projections, with film sequences showing the cell-like chambers of Councillor Crespel, a German bureaucrat whose rooms are filled with caged songbirds, moldy wreaths, old trophies, dusty tables, collections of beetles and butterflies. In all this junk the consumptive Antonia moves about, obsessed by the dream of becoming a famous singer like her mother. The last part of this episode centers on her arm-chair and a vast cinemascopic back projection filled with a vision of her death, as Dr. Miracle brings her mother's picture to life and forces her to sing.

The final episode shows Hoffmann pursuing love in Venice, and finding a whore. The film sequences are set in a large expanse of water, from which rise the symbols of Venice—buildings and mirrors, gondolas and scarlet boudoirs. The introductory barcarolle is barely breathed by a chorus of painted, almost naked courtesans. Hoffmann rejects their crude eroticism, and moves on to a carnival of masks, gambling, drink and dance. The cubist coach of the pirate-magician Dapertutto rises from the waters of the lagoon; the famous mirror aria is sung. Hoffmann is mad with passion for the prostitute Giuletta, who takes away his reason, his personality, and his character by giving his reflection to Dapertutto. A wild duel between Hoffmann and his rival, Schlemihl, takes place on the gondolas, and Schlemihl is killed. Hoffmann rushes to Giuletta, only to find her dressing to leave with a dwarf. He throws away his dagger and runs out onto the darkened stage, desperate, to end his story in a cellar full of black hats and cloaks. Drinking, he sings a hopeless song, but a group of students interrupt him, urging him to find meaning in his life. They take him through open doors into the early morning air, into a scene composed of real outdoor shots.

*From a program published by the Laterna Magika.*
JOSEF SVOBODA: NEW ELEMENTS IN SCENOGRAPHY

There is a radical disproportion between the theatre and modern technology. Our work is primarily a matter of light, and the most familiar aspects of our designs at the National Theatre are the Magic Lantern and multi-screen projection. We realize that neither of these techniques is unique or a panacea, but they seem to us the most logical and cohesive means of attacking the essence of a dramatic work.

Design: Leur journée

The multi-screen system is the basic scenographic principle of the National Theatre's mise-en-scène for Topol's Leur Journée. We have abandoned the fixed projection surfaces used at the Brussels World's Fair Laterna Magika and now use four screens which appear and disappear in various ways. These are directly related to the rhythm of the three specially equipped scenery wagons which bring on the three-dimensional set pieces. In this production, we use nine screens, each with two slide-projectors; three of these also have synchronized movie projectors, permitting command of a multiplicity of images. The appearances of the screens are effected by swinging them on horizontal or vertical axes, and by covering or revealing them. Screen 3 is equipped with a curtain for each of its four edges, making it possible to enlarge or shrink the image. Screen 7 is prepared for travel parallel to the proscenium stage-
frame. When this screen is in use, it operates by itself; the set is darkened and the total space is filled by a projected slide—the moving screen picks up and reveals portions of the image on its way across the stage. This way of animating a fixed slide projection, working in combination with the actors, produces a fresh kinetic space. Zeiss TK 35 diffusion-screens and projectors, linked to a common power line, were used for projection. The 2,000-watt slide projectors have automatic slide changers (Miroslav Pflug System). Each change is triggered by a special electronic “brain” in the individual projector; automatic operation is assured by the circuit used to regulate the set-lighting. The special electronic unit receives its shift-commands, determined by the intensity of the projector’s lamp, and transmits an impulse which activates the changer. Each slide magazine holds ten slides, 13 x 13 cm. The floor and the wagons are covered with black felt, which conceals the movements of the actors and absorbs the light. The lighting requires that the actors and major properties conform to the plane of the set, always preserving a zone of “shadow” between them and the screens, allowing the suppression of superfluous light and thus maintaining
the quality of the projections. The correct choice of materials for decor and costumes is essential.

**Design: Hamlet**

In *Hamlet*, the space was created by the reflection of cones of light on the surfaces of twenty-four panels (3 x 9 m.), covered with a special material called Plastilac, which has nearly 100% of the reflecting power of a black mirror. The spotlights were directed onto the mirrors from ramps placed downstage, so that the actors and decor were lit directly from the front. In this way we were able to use angles of reflection from points where it would be impossible to hang lights, giving the set virtually face-on direct illumination.

Plainly, this solution makes little sense without a complementary device: the twenty-four reflecting panels were secured to scene-shift equipment by five lines, permitting adjustment of angle and position. Without dimming the lights or lowering the curtain, the set could easily change twenty-four times. Thus the necessary lighting was remarkably plastic, and special effects such as the apparition of the ghost were easier than they have ever been.

**Design: The Seagull**

The design for *The Seagull* coped with the problem of creating a sunlit park, heat, the stifling atmosphere of a summer day: it was so successful that some spectators told us they were physiologically affected. We reduced the elements to a completely black open set, slightly raked, with ten screens distributed at the back; small—only 1.5 x 2 m.—reflectors, specially assembled with a low-intensity light source (200W, 24 V) were covered with tree branches. Thus, the park scene and its atmosphere were evoked by the penetration of “sunrays” through the trees.

The new use of light has given rise to a great many technical problems. First of all, high intensity at a sharp angle causes too much light on the set-floor; this led us to find materials to cover the stage so that some areas would have minimal reflection while others would reflect in a given direction—but would look the same from the audience.

As is readily seen, multi-screen design has an unlimited flexibility, the set becoming a sensitive instrument of the director. Our aim is not simply to replace the conventional painted and plastic set—which isn’t a new idea, anyway—but to convey certain themes with new images, fragmentation, and unusual compositions; to create a composition from the relationship between images and their rhythm in time and space; to confront color with black and white, human groups with props; to combine these plastic tableaux—projecting images and complete scenes, using cuts and montage and the rhythm of scenic space—and to produce a dramatic field sensitive to the
action within it. With the multi-screen technique, one can easily transpose the reality of a poem and make the poem a reality. The multi-screen image is dynamic; just like that of the actor, it can be erased by time. It can reveal and even create space, communicating the scale of man's activities, and then vanish when it is not needed. But, finally, it would be a mistake to consider slide- and film-projection as the principle expressive means of the "luminous theatre": the most important thing remains the intensity and liveliness of our response to the psychological conditions of the mise-en-scène.

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