

## JOSEF SVOBODA'S SCENOGRAPHY FOR SHAKESPEARE

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To study Josef Svoboda's stage designs for Shakespeare productions is to observe in microcosm not only a broad segment of Svoboda's creative palette but also an important branch of the evolution of twentieth-century design. Internationally recognized as one of the century's most notable designers, Svoboda is especially celebrated for his innovative work in shaping dramatic space with the aid of techniques and materials that draw upon modern technology and reflect a contemporary artistic sensibility. Unlike traditional set designers of previous generations who regarded their task as that of establishing a specific locale by providing a static, painted, illusionistic background for the action, the progressive designers of the twentieth century have searched for more abstract, functional, and preferably metaphoric scenic statements that embody the essence of a text rather than its literal environment. Svoboda has extended this search along previously unexplored avenues, especially by concentrating on settings that become part of the dramatic action by evolving with it as the play progresses. Not all of Svoboda's work is technically elaborate or complex. A setting may consist of only a few strategically placed objects whose significance changes as a result of shifts in lighting or the way actors relate to the objects. But when production concepts and budgets invite fuller expression, Svoboda is able to give freer rein to his talent. By means of complex lighting, including projections and mirrors, or by means of traditional or specially designed machines, the settings move, change position, shape, color, or texture, or metamorphose in still other respects in expressive accord with changes of scene or underlying motifs and rhythms of the action. As Svoboda puts it, his scenography (the sum-total of his contribution) becomes an "expressive instrument" or, indeed, another "actor" placed at the disposal of the director, whose interpretive concept is the ultimate guide of the production.

Technically simple or complex. Svoboda's scenography reveals one other fundamental characteristic: his architectonic orientation. A licensed architect who has also been a professor of architecture while pursuing his primary career as a scenographer, Svoboda has always been more concerned with the shaping and structuring of space than with depicting it in two-dimensional, decorative terms. Scene designers, even modern ones, have traditionally evolved from easel painters; Svoboda's evolution has been from the drafting table and the maquette. To this was added the influence of

directors and other designers whose approach to productions was essentially non-realistic and often poetic. In Czechoslovakia itself, Svoboda had the example of E.F. Burian and his startling experiments with lighting and projections in the 1930's. Then there was Svoboda's intimate cocreative work with other directors, such as Jindřich Honzl, Alfred Radok, Václav Kašík, and Otomár Krejča, each of whom perceived theater as inherently more allied to imaginative fantasy than to literal representation. Similar tendencies were evident in leading Czech designers in the generation preceding Svoboda: Vastislav Hofman, Antonin Heythum, Bedřich Feuerstein, František Muzika, and especially František Tröster. In brief, Svoboda did not emerge in a vacuum, even in Czechoslovakia. There was, moreover, indirect creative inspiration in the great pioneering work of other Europeans: Adolphe Appia, Edward Gordon Craig, the theater artists of the Bauhaus, and of course the Russian Constructivists. Svoboda consciously or unconsciously drew from these and other sources, but his own art has retained its integrity and his output has transcended that of his prototypes.

In over forty years Svoboda has created the stage settings and lighting for more than five hundred productions on both dramatic and opera stages. Seventeen of those productions have been of Shakespeare's plays, the most recent being Svoboda's third *Hamlet*, in 1982. Although the productions exhibit a great variety of approaches and modes, three productions may serve as examples of distinctive tendencies in Svoboda's Shakespearian scenography, from the austere to the richly orchestrated. *Henry V* (Prague, 1971) represents minimal scenography. A bare stage with only improvised properties and incidental backstage bric-a-brac became a universal space transformable by the spoken lines and the imagination of the spectators. The essential scenographic touch was a curved cloth cyclorama suspended some two meters above the stage level, thus facilitating entrances, exits, and rapid changes of necessary properties. Simple textural projections onto the cyclorama gave it more substance, and the sheer black space behind, below, and above the cyclorama accentuated the sculptural relief of the actors illuminated in the primary, downstage acting area.

*Romeo and Juliet* (Prague, 1963) retained an emphasis on austere dramatic space enhanced by an invitation to the audience's "imaginary forces" but enriched it with a kinetic masterpiece of abstractly stylized, highly functional forms. The production revealed Svoboda's primarily architectonic response to the challenge of creating scenography that would retain the flavor of the given period, evolve and respond to the flow of the action, and be a highly efficient stage instrument. The main architectural components of walls, stairs, floors, elevated arcades, and supplementary pieces would quietly assemble and reassemble in rhythmic response to the flow of scenes, sometimes during the scenes themselves, with the accompaniment of skillfully modulated lighting and specially composed music. The

performance as a whole became a richly orchestrated spectacle in which the scenography supplemented the acting and was inherent in director Otomár Krejča's production concept, rather than a self-serving *tour de force*. So successful was this scenography that Svoboda repeated it with necessary modifications in Havana (1964) and Köln (1969).

*As You Like It* (Prague, 1970) represented but one of Svoboda's more elaborate experiments with lighting and projections in conjunction with architecturally shaped space. Behind a multi-layered configuration of obliquely angled platforms were hung some nine panels of crumpled wire screens. These were in turn backed by a cyclorama of special translucent, pliable plastic known as Studio Folio, which has the special characteristic of appearing dark grey when viewed from the front but brilliantly colorful when used as a screen for rear projections. The scenographic "system" here was a combination of abstract forms rear-projected onto the folio and abstract floral patterns projected frontally onto the wire screens. The blending of the two forms of projection created a richly evocative atmosphere for the varied scenes of Shakespeare's romantic pastoral comedy.

Before noting earlier and later variations of these three basic approaches, it is worth looking at an instance of Svoboda's Shakespearian scenography that stands for almost everything he generally rejected. The seeming paradox was due to the force of historical circumstances. In the early 1950's, social-realism became the mandated mode of art in the recently established socialist state of Czechoslovakia. Whatever else this Soviet-inspired mode may have implied, it certainly meant a denial of the freely creative fantasy, of abstraction and metaphor, that Svoboda and others had been practicing for years. Instead, the ideal became a form of near-documentary realism that most nearly resembled the work of that nineteenth-century innovator, the Duke of Saxe Meiningen. Not even Svoboda was immune from this dogmatically applied formula, as was evident in his *Merchant of Venice* (Prague, 1954). Behind a triptychlike set of arches that remained constant for all the scenes, a series of two-dimensional set pieces and painted backdrops notable for their literalism established the locale of individual scenes. Granted that there is a certain gracefulness and ingenuity even in this banal treatment, the scenography here calls attention to those characteristics otherwise eschewed by Svoboda: it is academic, decorative, literal, and inflexible.

Five years after the *Merchant* production, Svoboda's scenography for the first of his three *Hamlet* productions (Prague, 1959) demonstrated how far he had evolved toward a style inherently more congenial to him. The set consisted of a broad horizontal element of stairs running the full width of the stage surmounted by a series of vertical elements: twenty-four panels that were laterally mobile in five different planes. It was a design of classic simplicity that was reminiscent of one of Gordon Craig's prototypal sets early in the century, a 1912 production of *Hamlet* at the Moscow Art Theater. Svoboda's version was technically much more efficient and drama-

tically more functional, producing twenty-four scene changes by smoothly varying the configurations in which the panels were assembled. Moreover, the special covering of the panels—a semi-glossy plastic—produced a softly reflective surface that could dimly mirror the action when desired and also help shape the stage space by reflecting special lights aimed at the panels. The sheer austerity of the scenography was in accord with the introspective, sober interpretation of the play inherent in the production as a whole.

The basic method of abstract architectonic forms capable of expressive variations was evident in several other Shakespeare productions. For a *Hamlet* in Brussels (1965) Svoboda again teamed with director Krejča. (The Prague *Hamlet* had been directed by Jaromír Pleskot.) The scenographic result was a seemingly monolithic block or wall that actually consisted of a series of meshing components forming functional units such as stairs, platforms, and hollow chambers by sliding forward or backward in relation to the basic mass. The latent symbolism of a dehumanized, oppressive machine was enhanced by a huge mirror slanted forward at a forty-five degree angle above the massive construction and thus reflecting out to the audience a second perspective on the menacingly moving forms as well as the actors situated on them. It was still another instance of a superbly flexible, dynamic instrument as well as a metaphorically apt design image embodying the production concept.

Quite similar was Svoboda's first *Macbeth* (Milan, 1966), in which three-dimensional steel gray forms rose from the floor, were lowered from the flies, and moved in from the sides during the course of the action, occasionally revealing a cyclorama of crumpled material that produced striking relief effects under appropriately controlled lighting. As a fundamental system, the *Macbeth* scenography more nearly resembled that of *Romeo and Juliet* than the Brussels *Hamlet* in that, like the former, the setting was more open, possessed greater variety of movement, and was done without mirrors.

A somewhat restricted variation of the principle underlying *Romeo and Juliet*, the two *Hamlets*, and *Macbeth*—large forms moving in space—occurred in *King Lear* (Budapest, 1964). In this production, rectilinear, hollow blocks of varying dimensions were suspended above the stage and raised or lowered in patterns related to the numerous scenes. The special touch here was that the blocks contained internal lighting units that illuminated the various parts of the stage. As in the later *Henry V*, simple projections provided textural surfaces to the blocks.

Two other projects marked by ingenious use of architectonic forms in space were *Macbeth* (Prague, 1969) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (an unrealized production originally planned for West Berlin in 1969). For *Macbeth*, massive, disintegrating walls enclosed a space within which was set a blue-black, roughly hewn scaffold, which served as a central acting platform for most of the scenes. It was occasionally defined for various locales by the

addition of simple properties and furniture. The platform was inherently ambivalent, at once a neutral, theatrical acting space recalling Medieval and Elizabethan stages, but also suggestive of an executioner's scaffold, in line with the grim action of the play. The intended scenography for *Antony and Cleopatra* was more highly stylized and transformable. A large central disk was built upon a turntable. One arc of the disk consisted of a broad set of stairs, while the remaining surface of the disk had various hinged flaps that could either be raised or lowered, thus creating the potential for a variety of configurations, which could in turn be enhanced by the addition to the disk of equally stylized forms (such as the prow of a ship) to suggest the many locations of the dramatic action. The fact that the entire disk could rotate merely extended the range of its possibilities, as did a supplementary, raisable trapdoor unit tangential to the disk on an extended apron of the stage. In several respects, the scenography was an interesting variation of the principle or system found in the *Romeo and Juliet* production and its kin.

It is difficult to generalize about these productions, but it is interesting that Svoboda seems to have relied more on severe architectonic forms for the tragedies and histories of Shakespeare, whereas he reserved his use of extensive projections for the comedies. There is perhaps something more inherently warm, colorful, and at least potentially romantic in the use of projections. This seemed evident in *As You Like It*, and it was also true in *Twelfth Night* (Prague, 1963) and *Midsummer Night's Dream* (Prague, 1963). Not that projections were the sole or even dominant element in either production, but they played a more important role than they did in any of the serious Shakespeare dramas. In *Twelfth Night*, the stage was enclosed by a dense series of strung cords which softened the lighting but also served as a distinctive surface for projections of abstract, stylized floral patterns, much as the crumpled screens did in the later *As You Like It*. The cords were supplemented by occasional use of outlined structures that were suspended above the stage to indicate various locales and by clusters of added cords which threaded balls of various sizes to give an abstract effect of willow branches. The overall visual impression was noteworthy for its blend of irony and lyricism. It was neither the first nor the last time that Svoboda was to experiment with variations of a strung cord system, which is true of virtually all the techniques evident in his Shakespeare productions. Svoboda has always been reluctant to abandon a given scenographic principle or system until he has exhausted its creative potential. The string cord system, for example, received its richest, most expressive treatment in his production of *Tristan und Isolde* at Bayreuth in 1974. By that time Svoboda had found the most satisfactory material for the cords (a blend of nylon and cotton) and their ideal dimension and placement (2.5 mm in diameter and 2.5 cm apart in a series of six to eight rows closing in the rear and sides of the acting area). Moreover, he was able to make use



of newer, more powerful projection units and to create a new system of projected images based on hand-painted pointillistic patterns.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* united many of the techniques already noted. Abstract forms in space were supplemented by very effective lighting and projections. Specifically, the acting area consisted of a slanted floor that curved up to form a rear wall, but since the surface was constructed of metallic lathing-like strips, much of the lighting would come from under and behind the floor-wall. For the court scenes, a number of rhomboid-shaped forms were suspended above the acting area, while the forest scenes were played with abstract leaf shapes lowered in from the flies and also raised up from the stage floor. These leaf shapes assumed various positions for different scenes; moreover, they received projections of leaf forms as did much of the acting area as a whole. The versatile setting approached an ideal consistently sought by Svoboda: a poetic, often metaphoric creation of a dramatically appropriate environment that embodies a contemporary vision by making use of contemporary techniques, forms, and materials.

It is fitting to end this brief survey with final examples that revert to the minimalism and simplicity found in *Henry V*. Regardless of how complex and powerful Svoboda's scenography may occasionally become (especially in his opera productions), he is always ready to cut back to the most elementary means when circumstances call for it, whether those circumstances are essentially a director's concept, budget or other material restrictions, or his own inclination to return to basics or, as he has put it, to "theater zero."

A radical example of this talent came about when Svoboda's German colleague, the director Ernst Schröder, asked him to supply a simplified setting for *The Tempest*, which was to tour to such cities as Munich and Berlin in 1976. Svoboda's solution was characteristically ingenious, artistic, and practical. The crucial scenographic element became a mobile unit built of two intersecting disks that could be rolled about the stage and assume a great variety of positions, thereby providing varied acting spaces to accommodate the different scenes of the play. Each disk had a characteristic shape, the smooth circumference of each being partly broken, respectively, by free-form curves and harsh angles, presumably to reflect the dual forces at work in the play. The two disks could of course be separated and thereby easily transported.

Svoboda's last Shakespeare production to date was his third *Hamlet* (Prague, 1982). Of his two preceding *Hamlets*, it was the first that this latest one more nearly resembles, except that it is even more austere. For most of the play, until the final moments, in fact, the stage is empty except for two low, broad flights of stairs running nearly the width of the stage, thus creating acting areas at three moderately varied levels. An absolute minimum of properties and furniture occasionally dresses this space. Two other elements belong to the theater itself: the unadorned fire curtain is

lowered to various heights above the stage, and the ornate Baroque proscenium arch and boxes of the National Theater form an intrinsic frame for the action that takes place on the apron that covers the orchestra pit. Then, at the critical moment just prior to the entrance of Fortinbras, the towering black drapes that have enclosed the rear of the stage are pulled to the floor, revealing a huge flight of stairs running the width of the stage and ascending to unseen heights, down which Fortinbras enters to survey the carnage and to dominate the terminal moments of the tragedy. Only this and carefully controlled lighting (but no projections) mark this scenography, which creates an austere, essentially neutral space in which the entire emphasis is on the actors and the world they shape.

In the final analysis, Svoboda's Shakespearian scenography, like his scenography as a whole, is the product of a talented individual who brings a wealth of expertise and creative fantasy to the task of embodying an essentially poetic vision on the stage. That vision is the product of the text, the director's concept, and Svoboda's own largely intuitive response to the work in question. It is a scenography that has demonstrated with countless variations how vital and expressive may be the contribution of this component of production to the art of theater. In the case of Shakespeare the contribution is perhaps more sharply evident (for better or worse) because of the familiarity one has with the plays and their productions. One is more likely to be able to make comparative assessments and so arrive at balanced judgments. Svoboda's Shakespeare scenography provides enough variation to make such assessments and judgments entertaining and profitable.