

## American Theatre Design Since 1945

Ronn Smith

### Introduction

The history of contemporary American theatre design, that is, the design of scenery, costumes, and lighting in the United States after World War II, can actually be traced back to the 1915 production of *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife*, directed by British director Harley Granville-Barker and designed by Robert Edmond Jones (see Volume 2, Chapter 8 for a discussion of this event and its context). Jones's flat, monochromatic set presented a stark contrast to the popular, realistic productions produced by David Belasco, and it is often cited as the first important domestic example of what would eventually be known as the New Stagecraft, which some recent scholars and critics have claimed to be the most significant development in twentieth-century American theatre.

In comparison to "Belascan realism," the New Stagecraft presented a "simplified realism." Primarily inspired by Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia, it promoted a visual stage picture that often bordered on the abstract. European designers associated with the New Stagecraft style included Max Reinhardt, Oskar Strnad, Georg Fuchs, and Joseph Urban, who began his American career working at the Boston Opera in 1912. In the United States, Samuel Hume's 1914 exhibition of new designs from Europe (seen in Boston, New York, Detroit, Chicago, and Cleveland), Boston's Toy Theatre, Chicago's Little Theatre, and the design work of Livingston Platt also played an important part in introducing this style to American production.

While *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife* occupies a critical position in the history of American theatre design, it was Jones's other designs – for *The Devil's Garden*, directed by Arthur Hopkins in 1915; for the John Barrymore Shakespeare productions (also directed by Hopkins) during the following decade; and his work on the major plays of Eugene O'Neill for the Provincetown Players – that actually popularized the New Stagecraft. Design styles go in and out of fashion with some regularity (particularly in the second

half of the twentieth century), and often as the result of economic realities. These realities are reflected in the New Stagecraft, for the simplicity of the style provided economic benefits that, at the time, could not be ignored by those working in the Little Theatre movement.

Besides being closely identified with the New Stagecraft movement in the United States, it is also Robert Edmond Jones who can be credited with introducing another significant innovation, one which has had a far greater impact on the evolution of American theatre and theatre design than is commonly recognized. Jones insisted that the scenic designer be present as an active participant at the beginning of the production process, thus changing the practice of design by giving the designer an opportunity to contribute to the interpretation of the script. The importance of this can be more fully appreciated when one considers the original productions of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) or Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), both of which were designed by Jo Mielziner, or, more recently, *A Chorus Line* (1975), designed by Robin Wagner. The pivotal position each of these productions holds in the history of American theatre can be attributed not only to the work of the individual playwrights, directors, and actors, but to the scenic designers as well.

Of those designers working during the twenties and thirties, Lee Simonson and Norman Bel Geddes have been the most influential. Simonson, who, like Jones and Hume, studied in Europe, designed for the Washington Square Players and, during the twenties, for the Theatre Guild. His work is characterized by the unit set, which was often surrounded by open space and backed with a cyclorama, on which additional scenic elements were projected. In comparison, Bel Geddes's style was far more abstract, but it also established a bolder, more theatrical image that became the hallmark of the so-called American style. Although many other significant designers can be linked to the New Stagecraft movement and its various permutations throughout the rest of the twentieth century, it was Jones and Simonson, and then Donald Oenslager, Jo Mielziner, Oliver Smith, and Boris Aronson who dominated American theatre design between 1920 and 1960.

### Scenic Designers: Forties to Sixties

Donald Oenslager, who assisted Robert Edmond Jones at the Provincetown Playhouse in the early twenties, designed over 250 productions in his career, including Broadway musicals (for example, *Anything Goes*), operas for both the Metropolitan Opera and the New York City Opera, and productions for regional theatres. Although he used a variety of styles, depending on the needs of the script, his work is often cited for its detailed elegance. His

greatest influence, however, may be on the many design students he trained at Yale School of Drama between 1925 and 1971, many of whom went on to establish their own careers as designers.

Jo Mielziner was both a production designer (with an impeccable control of color and light) and a theatre consultant, and is therefore considered by many to be the single most important figure in American theatre from the time he started working, in the mid-twenties, until 1976, when he died. His atmospheric, painterly work, sometimes referred to as "theatrical realism" or "poetic realism," usually combined scrims, scenic units, and intricate lighting plots (which he also designed) that allowed scenes to flow from one to the next with remarkable ease. In addition, Mielziner had a tremendous impact on the plays themselves (especially those produced in the thirties, forties, and fifties), and distinguishing between the success of the play and the success of the design can sometimes be difficult. Best known for his lyrical work on Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), both of which were directed by Elia Kazan, Mielziner could also design astonishingly realistic sets, like that for *Street Scene* (1929), as well as Broadway musicals, like *Guys and Dolls* (1950) and *Gypsy* (1959).

In contrast to the design work of Mielziner, Oliver Smith's sets were bright, bold, and in themselves often entertaining. Although trained as an architect, Smith began his design career in dance, with Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo* and *Fall River Legend*. He also had an extensive career as a producer of both theatre and dance – he was the co-director of American Ballet Theatre from 1945 to 1981 – and taught at New York University. Of the 400 theatre, dance, opera, and film productions he designed, Smith's name is indelibly linked to musicals of the forties, fifties, and early sixties, including *My Fair Lady* (1956), *Candide* (1956), *West Side Story* (1957), and *Hello, Dolly!* (1964).

Russian-born Boris Aronson was a painter, sculptor, and set designer, whose career as a designer nearly divides into two parts. The first, from 1923, when he emigrated to the United States by way of Berlin, to the late fifties, exhibits the strong influence of Aleksandra Ekster, a constructivist designer with the Kamerny Theatre, and painter Marc Chagall. His "second" career, characterized by a stronger sense of line and a more subtle use of color, dates from 1964, when he began collaborating with Harold Prince on a series of musicals, including *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), *Cabaret* (1966), *Company* (1970), *A Little Night Music* (1973), and *Pacific Overtures* (1976).

The painterly, atmospheric sets of the post-World War II era eventually gave way, in the early to mid-sixties, to a style that emphasized sculptural, textured, and symbolic qualities. Although elements of this new approach to set design were already apparent in the work of Boris Aronson and Rouben Ter-Arutunian, it is Ming Cho Lee's set for the New York Shakespeare Festival's

production of *Electra* in 1964 that is considered to mark the beginning of this new design aesthetic. In general, new materials and technologies, the symbolic use of color, and a sculptural use of space characterize the design of this period. Major designers associated with this style include David Mitchell, Robin Wagner, John Conklin, Douglas Schmidt, Santo Loquasto, and Marjorie Bradley Kellogg. While space limitations prohibit a detailed analysis of the work of these designers, a few words about Ming Cho Lee are in order here.

Born in Shanghai and educated at Occidental College and UCLA, Lee began assisting Jo Mielziner in 1954. His signature use of pipes, scaffolding, and collage-like images can be seen, in part, as a direct response to the poetic realism of Mielziner. Even the more recent work, which often reveals an acute attention to realistic detail, can be described as spare, efficient, or almost minimal in the way it supports the needs of a script. Although Lee's work is seldom seen on Broadway, he does design regularly for regional theatres and opera companies, plus the New York Shakespeare Festival and New York City Opera. But Lee also teaches, and has been the head of the design program at Yale School of Drama since the mid-eighties. When considering the number of professional designers who have studied with Lee at Yale, it is apparent that his influence on American scenography is substantial, and will remain so well into the next century.

### Costume and Lighting Design

Costume design, as a separate discipline of the production process, is a relatively recent phenomenon. During the early part of the twentieth century, one designer typically assumed full responsibility for the entire production, with assistants overseeing the various elements through the construction phase. As the process grew more complicated, however, the assistants were given more design responsibility, until ultimately each element had its own designer. Significant figures in the gradual evolution of design credits – and thus the development of each discipline as a legitimate field of endeavor – include Aline Bernstein, Robert Edmond Jones, and Jo Mielziner, all of whom were actively engaged in advancing the careers of their assistants in this manner.

Another critical event in the history of costume design was the actors' strike in 1919 for better wages and improved working conditions. As a result of the strike, costumes (including wigs, shoes, and stockings) had to be provided by the producer for all women in principal and chorus roles. (Up until this time, principal performers appeared in their own costumes.) It was only when the producers were contractually required to purchase costumes for their productions that they began consulting designers, or "specialists" as



they were identified at the time, about the design of the clothes. By 1936, costume designers were admitted into the United Scenic Artists Association, a union originally established for stage painters but which began accepting scenic designers in the early twenties. It was not until 1966, however, that costume designers were allowed to vote on union issues. According to one recent source, almost 50 percent of the programs for New York productions at the end of the forties included a credit for costume design, as compared to 1 percent around the turn of the century.

Names associated with the early history of costume design include Irene Sharaff, who at one time was a costume assistant for Aline Bernstein and who eventually became known primarily for her stylish designs and use of color on stage and in films; Raoul Pene Du Bois, who also designed scenery; Charles LeMaire; Lucinda Ballard, who designed for theatre, film, and ballet; and, as the profession progressed into the forties, Miles White, Freddy Wittop, and Alvin Colt.

Although the history of stage lighting is considerably older than that of costume design, the initial attempt consciously to determine how light illuminates the scenery and actors to complete an integrated stage picture can be linked to David Belasco and his electrician, Louis Hartmann, who worked together during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, given Belasco's devotion to theatrical realism, Belasco and Hartmann are acknowledged to have brought a more realistic look to the lighting of theatre productions. For their 1900 production of *Madame Butterfly*, for example, they used silk color rolls behind the set's translucent screens to replicate a slow fade from day to night. According to the critics of the time, the result was astonishingly lifelike.

Not unlike the gradual emergence of the costume designer, the role of the lighting designer also evolved over a period of time (that is, it wasn't until 1962 that the United Scenic Artists Association expanded its membership to include lighting designers). However, advancements in the professional practice of lighting design can be more directly related to the developing technology. As the technology developed, so too did the profession. For example, the introduction of ductile-tungsten filament lamps (which replaced carbon-filament lamps) in 1910; their improved efficiency over the next five years; the elimination of footlights and the increased use of spotlights between 1915 and 1920; new suspension devices, developed in the early twenties (which meant that lighting units could be hung where appropriate rather than where dictated by a theatre's permanent mounts); the use of ground glass slides in plano-convex lens spotlights; the installation of reactance dimmers and the ability to preset those dimmers; the round Fresnel lens of the early thirties; and the ellipsoidal-reflector spotlights, demonstrated by Kliegl Bros. Lighting in 1933—all of these advances had (and in some cases continue to have) a vast impact

One of the key figures in the early history of lighting design is Stanley R. McCandless. Trained as an architect, McCandless taught the first academic course in stage lighting at Yale University in 1926. The syllabus for the course was published the following year, and in 1932 he published *A Method of Lighting the Stage*, which is still used in the teaching of lighting design. Theodore Fuchs, author of *Stage Lighting* (1929), was one of McCandless's students, as were Jean Rosenthal and Peggy Clark, who, along with Abe Feder, were the first to be given program credit as "lighting designers" on Broadway.

Jean Rosenthal designed lighting for both theatre and architectural projects and is often credited, along with Feder (for whom she worked as an assistant), with inventing the field of lighting design. It was Rosenthal who devised symbols to represent lighting instruments, plotted her designs on paper, and insisted on lighting rehearsals as part of the production process. Although she had worked in the Federal Theatre Project with Orson Welles and John Houseman, it was her position as lighting and production supervisor for choreographer Martha Graham from 1938 until her death in 1969 that informed nearly all of her work, which was often noted for the mood it precisely evoked. Rosenthal's major Broadway productions included *West Side Story* (1957) and *The Sound of Music* (1959).

Peggy Clark began her career in theatre as a costume and set designer, but eventually, while working for Oliver Smith, decided to focus on lighting design. Although she lit theatre, dance, and opera, she is best known for her work on musicals, on many of which she collaborated with Smith. She was, in 1968, the first woman to serve as President of the United Scenic Artists.

Abe Feder is a seminal figure in the history of lighting design, and he was as well known for his architectural lighting as he was for his stage lighting. In both areas he established standards that other designers, for many years, would attempt to emulate. Often identified as "a genius with light," Feder was also described as being obsessed with light and how it enhanced an object, whether it was a stage set or the exterior of a building or the building's interior. The "Lighting by Feder" credit appeared in more than 300 Broadway programs, including *My Fair Lady* (1956) and *Camelot* (1960), and is forever linked with the illumination of the 1964 New York World's Fair and the RCA Building (and Prometheus Fountain) in Rockefeller Center.

Another significant development in lighting design occurred in 1947, when George C. Izenour introduced a lighting control system that incorporated a main lighting console and a preset panel, which had the ability to hold ten full presets. Not only could the system be run by one or two electricians, but because it was small, it could be located in the auditorium with an unhampered view of the stage. It was one of the more popular of the flexible control systems installed in theatres throughout the United States during the fifties.

thyration tube was replaced by the silicon-controlled rectifier. This allowed for smaller dimmer banks, which meant that more dimmers could fit in the equivalent space. By the mid-sixties, stage lighting was also utilizing new computer devices to store data, although it wasn't until the opening of *A Chorus Line* in 1975 that a lighting "memory" system was used on Broadway. Shortly thereafter, the control of a large number of dimmers through the use of memory computers and miniature consoles became standard practice, allowing designers to include more lighting instruments in their shows. The number of lighting units used in Broadway productions leaped from between 300 and 400 in 1950 to frequently over 1,000 in the early nineties.

### Globalization of Design

While many of the technical and professional advances mentioned above continued to influence the design of American theatre throughout the rest of the twentieth century, forces of a profoundly different kind began to influence theatre production around the late sixties and early seventies. It would require a great deal of space to analyze in depth these various phenomena and their effect on the design of theatre, but collectively they produced what might best be described as a "globalization" of design, which can be seen both vertically and horizontally throughout the theatre industry. (As used here, "theatre industry" is understood to include the production of commercial, non-profit, and "public" theatre – that is, rock concerts, industrial shows, theme parks, and so forth.

In other words, while the introduction and popularization of a new style or design trend during the last quarter of the twentieth century could be linked to a specific individual, production, or technical innovation, it was in actuality a broader constellation of cultural, social, political, and economic factors that produced the more significant changes in the design of scenery, costumes, and lighting. In addition, these factors affected all aspects of theatre production, from what was happening *within* clearly defined segments of the theatre community (hence "vertically") to what was happening *between* various theatre communities (hence "horizontally").

One of the major factors in this globalization process was the proliferation of theatre activity that occurred between 1965, when the National Endowment for the Arts was founded, and the mid-eighties. Although primarily associated with resident non-profit professional theatres, the impetus for this extraordinary growth – from 35 regional companies in 1966 to 230 theatres mounting 3,400-plus annual productions twenty years later – can be located in the Off- and Off-Off Broadway movements of the fifties and early sixties, discussed in more detail elsewhere in this history.

For the purposes of this chapter, Off-Broadway refers to New York City theatres, either commercial or non-profit, not located in the immediate vicinity of Times Square.<sup>1</sup> Compared to what was being produced on the Broadway stages, these theatres presented less well-known plays or experimental productions on very small budgets.

While Off-Off Broadway could be defined along similar lines, the resolutely non-commercial productions in this category were often produced, on even smaller budgets, in coffeehouses, churches, lofts, garages, and storefronts throughout Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side.<sup>2</sup> Both Off-Broadway and Off-Off Broadway were viewed as alternative theatre movements, the former to what was happening in the commercial theatre on Broadway, and the latter to what was happening in the Off-Broadway sector.

Also referred to as the regional, repertory, or simply the resident theatre movement, the resident non-profit professional theatre movement established an alternative theatre network outside of New York. These non-profit institutions, which presented both classical and innovative contemporary work, received a great deal of support initially from the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. They also provided a kind of training ground for professional actors, directors, administrators, and, of course, designers.<sup>3</sup> Support services for this network, now including many of the non-profit theatres in New York City, continue to be the focus of the Theatre Communications Group (or TCG), which was founded in 1961 to serve as the national organization of these theatres.

The increased number of Off-Broadway, Off-Off Broadway, and resident theatres naturally provided more opportunities for designers, but the growth in numbers also suggests that theatre was assuming a more important position in the cultural life of the entire country. Whether or not this was in response to the increased number of hours Americans devoted to leisure-time activities, or to some other reason, may be difficult to determine, yet the fact remains theatres were attracting larger audiences and, simultaneously, more individuals began seeing the theatre as a place where they could build careers.

Consequently, as the number of professional theatres grew during this period, so too did the opportunities to study design in undergraduate or graduate programs. Previously, would-be designers apprenticed themselves to someone already working in the field; and eventually, if they were lucky, they would be asked to design a show. However, with the escalating cost of productions, fewer and fewer theatres could provide on-the-job training for designers with little or no experience. As a consequence, many individuals turned to academic programs to learn their trade and build portfolios. According to a survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts, an estimated 9 million people saw 30,000 productions at approximately 2,500 universities



and colleges in 1977. This staggering number of productions suggests an explosion of theatre activity at universities and colleges across the country, but it also suggests that the academic theatre community could provide viable career opportunities if, for whatever reason, the designer chose not to work in either commercial or non-profit theatres.

Much of the academic training was conducted on the graduate level, in what are commonly referred to as pre-professional programs that, after two or three years, award Master of Fine Arts degrees. Although no two MFA programs were exactly alike, many are or were focused on practical ability and studio experience. Such programs were offered by such institutions of higher education as Boston University, Brandeis University, California Institute of the Arts, California State University–Long Beach, Carnegie Mellon University, DePaul University, Florida State University, Indiana University, Ithaca College, New York University, North Carolina School of the Arts, Rutgers, Southern Methodist University, State University of New York–Purchase, Temple University, University of Missouri–Kansas City, University of California–San Diego, University of Southern California, University of Texas–Austin, University of Washington, University of Wisconsin–Madison, and the Yale School of Drama. Many a professional career has been built and sustained through the relationships established while attending one of these academic programs.

Another aspect worth considering as it relates to the history of theatre design is the professional networks that were established as a result of attending one of these programs. In an environment where future professionals are learning their craft, whether it be designing, directing, acting, or producing, certain alliances were bound to occur, and these alliances often provide expanded opportunities for building a career after graduation. For example, directors would hire designers and actors they had worked with at college, or a designer, when available to work on a particular production, would recommend another designer with whom he or she had studied. Such "networking" is a part of many industries, but the effect it has had on theatre design at the end of the twentieth century cannot be underestimated.

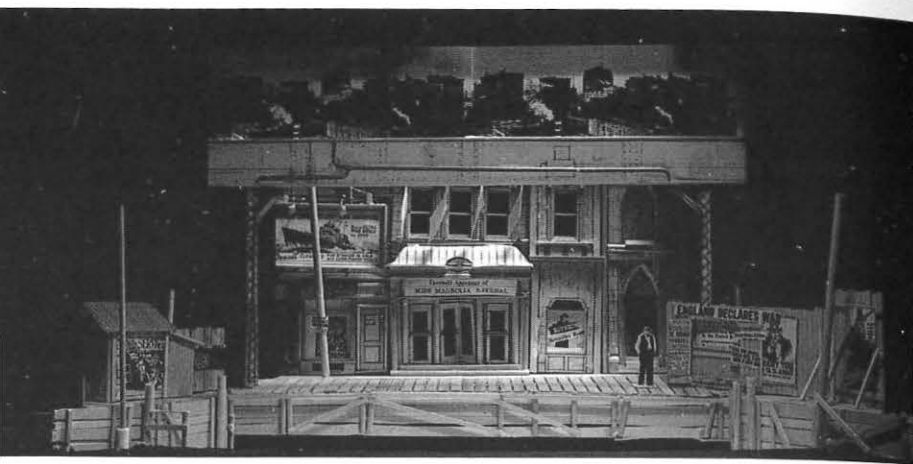
There was one other significant training program for designers that needs to be mentioned here, but it was not affiliated with a college or university. The Polakov Studio and Forum of Stage Design, begun in New York City in 1958 by Lester Polakov, trained many important designers during its thirty-five-year history. Besides being an esteemed teacher, Polakov designed on and Off-Broadway as well as for opera, film, and industrial shows. Many of the designers of the last forty years of the twentieth century were trained either at the Polakov Studio or at one of the educational institutions listed in a previous paragraph.

Another major influence affecting American theatre design since 1945 includes a complicated set of economic factors, some of which were no less powerful for being less apparent than those most frequently mentioned in discussions on this issue. How American theatre as a business has evolved over the course of its history is beyond the scope of this particular chapter, but certain points are worth mentioning. Although never completely dormant during the Great Depression of the thirties, theatre did experience a gradual decline throughout the period. It was not until the early forties, with the arrival of the musical, that this trend was reversed, but by then investment in professional theatre had become a highly speculative business. As a result, capitalization through corporate financing was replaced by limited partnerships, a process in which several individuals (or a group of individuals acting as a single unit) would invest in a production and share the financial consequence, whether good or bad.

Another alternative to the high cost of commercial productions can be seen in the formation of non-profit theatres, especially those founded in the sixties (see note 3, and LoMonaco, "Regional/Resident Theatre," in Chapter 2). The rapid expansion of this national network was a result, in part, of support received from the newly established National Endowment for the Arts, but also from changes in the tax laws, which made it easier for individuals to make tax-deductible donations to non-profit institutions. Thirty years later many of these theatres – for some have already closed due to mounting and unmanageable deficits – now face new financial challenges as certain members of the Congress call for the complete elimination of the NEA. Concurrently, the commercial theatre in the United States, which in the nineties is still found primarily in New York, is also wrestling with the reality of escalating production costs, ticket prices beyond the budget of many individuals who would otherwise support the theatre, and an amorphous audience base.

What all of this means in terms of design and designers is worth considering, even though briefly. When public and private support for the arts is being radically reduced, those administrators who are responsible for an institution's annual budget will understandably look for ways to trim their costs. Certain operating expenses, however, cannot be cut without seriously compromising the effectiveness of the organization, so other line items, like the design of a specific production, are looked at for a quick fix. Good designers know how to stretch a dollar, as it were, but the dollar can be stretched only so far before it snaps back to reality.

This factor does present one reasonable explanation for the prevalence of minimalist or fragmented sets (in which an entire environment is suggested by just a few objects) and the eclectic use of period and contemporary costumes (often pulled from the institution's stock) throughout the eighties and



0. Model (exterior of Palmer House in Act II) for *Show Boat* as designed and executed by Eugene Lee. Unlike many designers, Lee prefers to work with models rather than set renderings. Courtesy of Eugene Lee.

into the nineties as a response to this economic situation. More than one resident theatre with a serious cash flow problem has addressed its deficit by performing much of its season in the round, thus completely avoiding the more expensive sets that otherwise would be required to fill its stage space. Other theatres have made different choices, including producing plays that use one set instead of two or three, the producing of plays with relatively small casts, or co-producing productions with another theatre, thus sharing expenses. The full and long-range effects of these cost-cutting measures have yet to be determined, but they clearly influence the work of the designers and, by extension, the theatregoer's experience.

But the health of the theatre community and the quality of the work of its designers is also a product of other financial issues, some of which relate to the theatre only tangentially. For example, the costume shops in New York originally served Broadway, Off-Broadway, opera, and ballet, and more recently both film and television. However, as money became tighter, one noticed in New York fewer productions, fewer lavish period extravaganzas, and an increased number of "modern dress" shows. With fewer and fewer shows being "built," each of the costume shops had to find new ways to stay afloat financially. Some of them diversified their services by working for film and television, which fortunately was moving back into the city, while others simply closed.

Additional economic challenges surfaced as the result of a booming real estate market in New York City during the eighties, which affected many small

businesses, including costume shops (but not scene shops, which for various reasons could operate competitively within a 100-mile radius of Manhattan). Astronomical increases in rents forced some of the shops to seek smaller spaces, others to purchase a building cooperatively, and still others to close completely. Some of the costume shops dealing with the financial situation of the times include Accu-Costumes (formerly Schnoz and Schnoz), Eaves Brooks Costume Co., Grace Costumes, Barbara Matera, Michael-Jon Costumes Inc., Jimmy Meyer, Ltd., Parsons-Meares Ltd., John Reid Costumes, Inc., Studio, and Vincent's.

As more and more set, costume, and lighting designers found, for some of the reasons discussed above, fewer and fewer opportunities to work in the theatre, they began seeking employment in other areas. Although the resumé of select older designers do contain a mix of theatre, opera, and ballet, the younger designers began patching together careers by working for resident theatres, accepting full- or part-time teaching positions, or designing the occasional film or television show (which became easier when film and television production returned to New York in the eighties). Some designers, like Eugene Lee and Santo Loquasto, successfully combined work in the theatre with work, respectively, in television and film. (Lee has designed *Saturday Night Live!* since its inception; Loquasto has been the production designer on many of Woody Allen's films.) Others, however, like Patrizia von Brandenstein and David Chapman, went into film and rarely returned to the stage.

Another group of designers sought work in what is not traditionally thought of as theatre, but could be described as a kind of "public theater," by which is meant rock concerts, industrial shows (also referred to as "business theatre" or "industrial theatre"), and theme parks (such as Disney World and Universal Studios). Given the demanding schedules associated with productions for these, few designers could maintain a career that included one of them plus theatre, but they did provide a late-twentieth-century alternative for talented individuals who wished to find a major outlet for their creative and technical skills.

The design of rock concerts – and how the design of rock concert lighting consequently influenced theatre design – is a fascinating phenomenon, but far too complex and technical for this overview. Suffice it to say that an entire moving light industry was developed to accommodate the concert tours of David Bowie, Michael Jackson, Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones, Kiss, Madonna, Queen, and Tina Turner, to name a few of the more popular performers. In addition, the design of these shows, as well as the accompanying music videos that promoted the performers, also had a profound effect on the design of theatre, film, and television. Given the economic reality of the time, a designer could not afford to specialize in one theatre form. Nor could the designer remain competitive if he or she were unaware of what was



occurring in other theatrical forms, whether or not they choose to work in those forms.

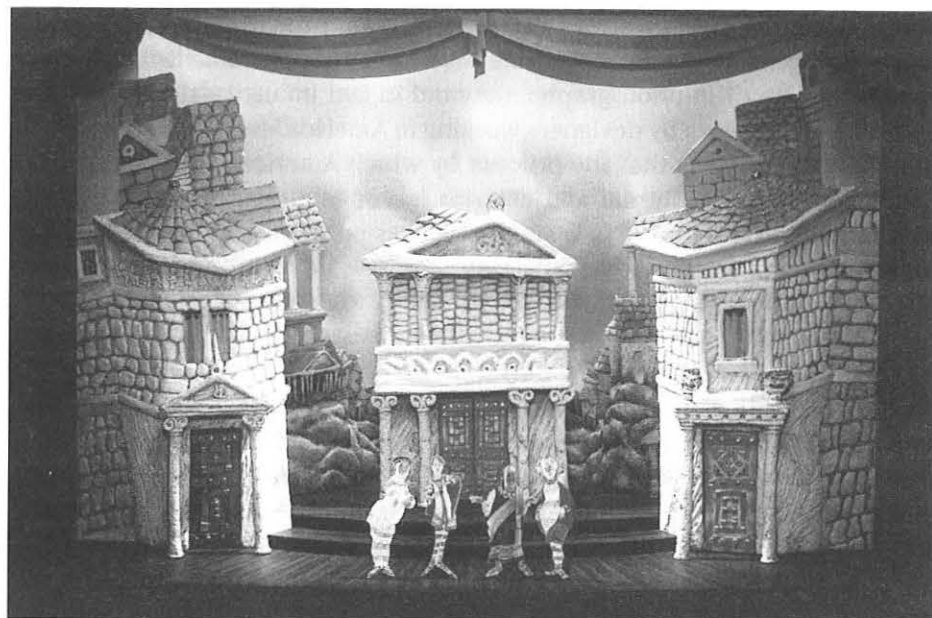
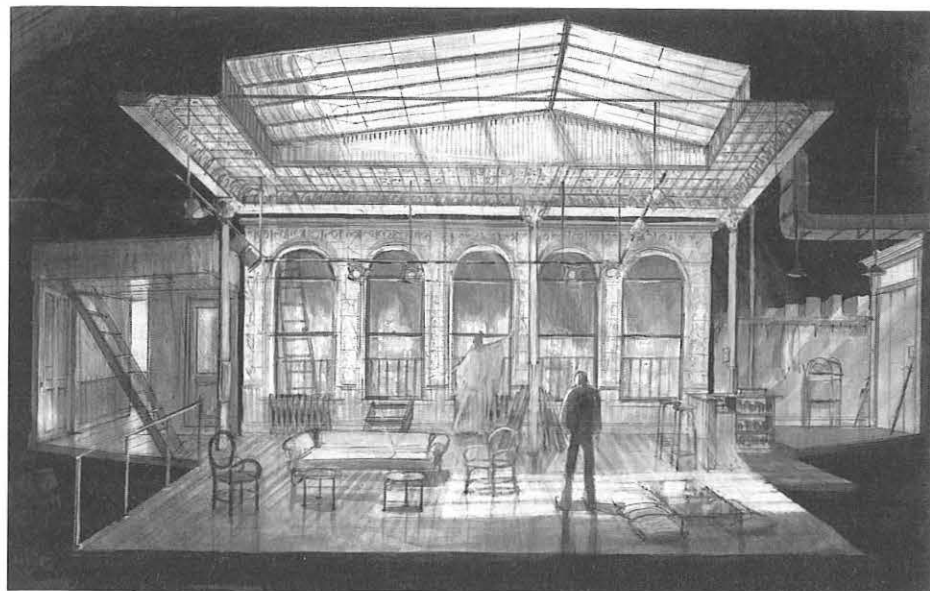
### Cross-fertilization

As designers move between theatre, opera, ballet, film, and television, between rock concerts, industrial shows, and theme parks, between commercial, non-profit, and academic institutions; as the definition of theatre continues to expand to include all kinds of performances and public presentations; as interest in theatre and the financial health of its major institutions fluctuates from year to year, one notices a kind of movement within the industry that can, at first glance, appear unsettling. While some may consider this movement to be the symptom of an unhealthy industry, others view it as an opportunity for the industry to renew itself, which it must do if it is to remain a vital part of the culture in which it is found. It is this rich and various process of cross-fertilization that ultimately characterizes much of what is happening in the design of American theatre at the end of the twentieth century.

For example, the physical staging of *Dreamgirls* (1981) and the opening sequence of *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983) were lavishly praised for their cinematic qualities, and, in fact, the set designers of these productions (Robin Wagner and David Mitchell, respectively) did find a theatrical equivalent for replicating cinematic conventions on the stage. Or for another example, a Russian architecture student by the name of George Tsypin moved to New York, studied stage design at New York University, and then produced settings, like those he designed for productions directed by Peter Sellars or JoAnne Akalaitis, that exhibited a remarkable understanding of the plasticity of architectural space, an understanding that had not been part of the theatrical vocabulary up until that point.

For better or for worse, Las Vegas, MTV, and Walt Disney also generated new approaches and methods that called into question the traditional assumptions about design and the creative process. And although the theatre industry has never suffered from a glut of professional publications, such magazines as *Theatre Design & Technology*, *Theatre Crafts*, and *American Theatre* participated in the process by publishing articles and illustrating them with production photographs, which subsequently informed the work of many American designers who otherwise would not have known about the productions. Patrice Chereau's 1976 production of Wagner's *Ring* cycle for the Bayreuth Festival, for instance, had an enormous impact on subsequent design not only because of its radical interpretation but because photographs and video documentation of the production were available worldwide.

This last example brings up one more topic for consideration, one which



31 and 32. Designs by two of the most prominent and active designers in the American theatre during the last quarter of the twentieth century. John Lee Beatty's set design (top) for Lanford Wilson's *Burn This* (he has designed virtually all of Wilson's premieres) reflects a kind of lyric realism, typical of one of his many styles. Courtesy of John Lee Beatty. The model (below) of the revival of the musical *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1996) as designed by Tony Walton (designer of the original 1963 production as well) is a good example of his witty and playful style.

boundaries and the design process. Not everyone could travel to Europe to see the ground-breaking, visually stunning productions of directors such as Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, or Giorgio Strehler, or the many productions presented as part of the Festival d'Avignon, the Edinburgh International Festival (and Festival Fringe), or Italy's Spoleto Festival. Productions from Europe, as well as from Africa, Asia, and South America, however, appeared somewhat regularly on American soil after the mid-seventies, either as independent productions or under the auspices of various festival umbrellas, including the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival, PepsiCo Summerfare and the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina. The work of German choreographer Pina Bausch was virtually unknown in the United States until her company, the Tanztheater Wuppertal, was presented in the Next Wave Festival of 1984. Designers and general theatregoers alike were in awe of her work, much of which depended on meticulously crafted stage pictures that bordered on the surrealistic. In the previous year, Giorgio Strehler's ravishing production of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, presented as part of PepsiCo Summerfare on the campus of State University of New York-Purchase, was also lauded for its visual effects. While it is difficult to determine precisely how these and other foreign productions informed the work of American designers, it is safe to assume that on some level, whether seen in person or in photographs, they did in fact influence the quality and approach of the work by designers working in America, even if only indirectly. What is undeniable is that the process by which American theatre design is influenced by both internal and exterior forces is a complex one, and one which cannot be reduced to a simple discussion of cause-and-effect or the identification of various stylistic trends.

### Conclusion

At the end of the twentieth century it is ever more difficult to suggest what theatre will look like, both figuratively and literally, in the twenty-first century. In the time it will take this chapter to move from the editor's desk to the printed page, the death of Broadway will be announced yet again, exciting new theatre companies will receive rave reviews in their local newspapers, and any number of young, talented individuals will be hired to design their first professional productions. With near-instant access to almost anything almost anywhere in the world, tracing influences and making predictions becomes an exercise in futility.

The theatre, in other words, is constantly reinventing itself, and designers play a pivotal role in this process. With rare exceptions, however, their work is seldom acknowledged in reviews with any more than a sentence or two.

And while a handful of designers might be known to the general public who regularly attend theatre performances, there is little evidence to indicate that many of these theatregoers fully understand the important role set, lighting, sound and costume designers often play in the productions they attend, especially in the productions of new work. Playwrights, directors, and actors receive a fair amount of coverage, although even in the trade press these articles almost always tend to be personality-based. Designers, except for the award-winners, get noticeably less coverage. Even in the specialized publications that focus on contemporary art and design, the feature article that takes an informed, critical look at theatre design is a rarity.

Part of the problem lies with the press, of course, but equal responsibility for the situation must be shared by those academic communities that train future theatre professionals and by the practicing theatre professionals themselves. A program that includes a course, or even part of a course, in which students are taught how to look at, analyze, and write about contemporary theatre design is a rarity. This is unfortunate for several reasons. First, it implies that theatre design is less important, less valuable than some other forms of design. Second, it fails to document a rich legacy of interesting and innovative work now being done by a large number of very talented artists. And third, the lack of such documentation affects the quality of work to come not only from designers, but from everyone involved in the production or study of professional theatre.

Granted, the ephemeral nature of theatre and the challenges involved in mounting a production cannot be discounted, but better documentation is necessary if the art form is to develop and grow. As David Cockayne, a British theatre designer and educator, writes at the end of "Documenting Design" (*TD&T*, Spring 1989): "We are known by the works we carry out. But we may be forgotten and fail to make our proper mark on the development of theatre and the people we serve through it if we simply neglect to make a record that truly does our work justice." Without a proper record, and without the proper scholarly writing about "the record," the future of theatre may be more precarious, certainly more allusive, than even the most cynical practitioner could imagine.

The following is a selective, short list of the significant set, costume, and lighting designers working in the United States at the end of the twentieth century. For every name that appears on the list, three to five others could be added. The designers included, however, have made immeasurable contributions to American theatre design, and their work is worth studying for what it contributed to a particular production as well as for how it advances theatre history in general and theatre design in particular.

Set designers, some of whom also design costumes (c) or lighting (l), include: Loy Arcenas, John Arnone, Chris Barreca, Mark Beard, John Lee



atty, Maria Bjorson (c), Scott Bradley, Zack Brown (c), David Chapman, Jim  
 yburgh, John Conklin (c), Clarke Dunham (l), Ben Edwards (l), Dex  
 wards, Karl Eigsti, Eldon Elder (l), Heidi Ettinger (previously Landesman),  
 hard Foreman, Ralph Funicello, Edward T. Gianfrancesco, David Gropman,  
 vid Hays (l), Desmond Heeley (c), Riccardo Hernandez, Robert Israel (c),  
 drew Jackness, Neil Peter Jampolis (c), David Jenkins, Marjorie Bradley  
 logg, Hugh Landwehr, Peter Larkin, Eugene Lee, Ming Cho Lee, Adrienne  
 el, Santo Loquasto (c), Thomas Lynch, Charles McClennahan, Michael  
 Garty, Derek McLane, David Mitchell, John Napier (c), Paul Palazzo, Russell  
 kman, Neil Patel, Kevin Rigdon (l), Douglas W. Schmidt, Ann Sheffield,  
 en Sherman, Sharon Sprague, Douglas Stein, Anita Stewart, Tony Straiges,  
 uben Ter-Arutunian (c), James Tilton (l), George Tsypin, Robin Wagner,  
 ny Walton (c), Robert Wilson (l), Paul Wonsek (l), Michael Yeorgan (c), and  
 nes Youmans.

Costume designers include: Theoni V. Aldredge, Joseph G. Aulisi, Whitney  
 usen, Jeanne Button, Patton Campbell, Judy Dearing, Judith Dolan,  
 oorah Dryden, Ann Emonts, Christina Giannini, Jess Goldstein, Jane  
 eenwood, Susan Hilferty, Ann Hould-Ward, Willa Kim, Florence Klotz,  
 anne Lee, William Ivey Long, Carol Luiken, David Murin, Jennifer von  
 yrhauser, Patricia McGourty, Robert Morgan, Ruth Morley, Carol Oditz,  
 rtin Pakledinaz, Nancy Potts, Dunya Ramicova, Carrie Robbins, Melina  
 bt, Ann Roth, Rita Ryack, James Scott, David Toser, Susan Tsu, Ann Waugh,  
 oert Wojewodski, Albert Wolsky, Patricia Zipprodt, and Catherine Zuber.

Lighting designers: Frances Aronson, Martin Aronstein, Brenda Berry, Ken  
 ington, John Boesche (projections), Dawn Chiang, Peggy Clark, Pat Collins,  
 ggy Eisenhauser, Beverly Emmons, Arden Fingerhut, Jules Fisher, Paul  
 lo, John Gleason, David Grill, Wendall Harrington (projections), David  
 rsey, Ralph Holmes, Allen Lee Hughes, James I. Ingalls, Peter Kaczorowski,  
 vin Lamotte, Kirby Malone (projections), Anne Militello, Craig Miller, Robby  
 nk, Roger Morgan, Tharon Musser, Richard Nelson, Dennis Parichy,  
 hard Pilbrow, Richard Riddell, Leni Schwendinger (projections), Jerome  
 in (projections), Thomas Skelton, Stephen Strawbridge, Howard Thies,  
 nifer Tipton, Gil Wechsler, Marc B. Weiss, and Scott Zielinski.

The twentieth century has witnessed great advances in the way theatre pro-  
 ceptions have been designed. Some of these advances, as suggested in the  
 beginning of this chapter, are based on developing technology and changing  
 professional practices. Other advances, occurring later in the century, are  
 more closely connected to public and private support for the arts, the broader  
 entertainment industry, popular culture, mass media, the proliferation of aca-  
 demic and professional training programs, and economic factors. What any of  
 these means for theatre in the twenty-first century remains to be seen, of course,  
 but we can be sure that future changes will be both rapid and exciting, and that  
 new influences are likely to emerge from the unlikelyst of places.

### Notes

- 1 A list of such theatres would include American Place Theatre, Chelsea Theatre Center, Circle Repertory, Hudson Guild, Jewish Repertory, Lincoln Center Theater Company, Manhattan Theatre Club, Negro Ensemble Company, New York Shakespeare Festival, Pan Asian Repertory, Phoenix Theatre, Roundabout Theatre Company, and Second Stage.
- 2 Included in this list would have to be Caffè Cino, Ellen Stewart's La MaMa ETC, Judson Poets' Theatre, and Theatre Genesis, followed by such companies, usually associated with a particular individual, as the Byrd Hoffman School for Byrds (Robert Wilson), Mabou Mines (JoAnne Akalaitis, Lee Breuer, Ruth Maleczek), Manhattan Project (Andre Gregory), The Performance Group (Richard Schechner), Ontological-Hysteric Theatre Company (Richard Foreman), The Open Theatre (Joseph Chaikin), the Ridiculous Theatrical Company (Charles Ludlum), The Wooster Group (Elizabeth LeCompte), and, in California, George Coates Performance Works. For more specific coverage of many of these, see Carlson's and Gussow's essays in chapter 2.
- 3 Theatre institutions associated with this movement include Actors Theatre of Louisville, the Alley Theatre (Houston), Alliance Theatre (Atlanta), American Conservatory Theatre (San Francisco), Arena Stage (Washington, D.C.), Center Stage (Baltimore), Dallas Theater Center, The Guthrie Theater (Minneapolis), Hartford Stage Company (Connecticut), Long Wharf Theatre (New Haven), Magic Theatre (San Francisco), Mark Taper Forum (Los Angeles), Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Seattle Repertory Theatre, South Coast Repertory (Costa Mesa, California), and Trinity Repertory Company (Providence, R.I.). See LoMonaco's discussion in Chapter 2.

### Bibliography: American Theatre Design Since 1945

The history of American theatre design must be patched together from a variety of sources, as there are no comprehensive, scholarly studies of the field. Of the design books that do exist, the majority can more accurately be described as "how-to" manuals (that is, how to construct a set or build a costume or illuminate the stage), and, therefore, with one or two exceptions, are not included here. Brief historical entries for each of the disciplines can be found in the *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, edited by Don B. Wilmeth and Tice L. Miller, from which came much of the pre-1945 information in the beginning of this chapter (see "Costume," "Scenic design," and "Stage lighting"). The important topic of theatre architecture, omitted from this chapter, is given a useful survey as well (additional sources on architecture are suggested in this bibliographical essay). General histories of theatre that include significant amounts of historical information on the design of scenery, costumes, and lighting include Bordman's *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*; Brockett's *History of the Theatre*; and Mary C. Henderson's *Theater in America*, which contains an extensive bibliography. Bigsby's *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama* is also very helpful in the piecing together of a comprehensive history.

Although ostensibly a "how-to" manual, *Designing and Drawing for the Theatre*, by Pecktal, is included here because it is lavishly illustrated with many photographs of contemporary sets, set models, and sketches for sets and costumes. Unlike other

well as lengthy, very informative "conversations" with Tony Walton, Robert O'Hearn, Douglas W. Schmidt, Ming Cho Lee, Tony Straiges, David Mitchell, Robin Wagner, Santo Loquasto, David Jenkins, John Conklin, John Lee Beatty, and John Napier. Two other books, both by George C. Izenour, provide a detailed, historical analysis of theatre architecture and technology: *Theater Design* and *Theater Technology*. While both books are intended primarily for professional architects, theatre consultants, and technicians, they each contain much useful information for the evaluation of theatre practice in the second half of the twentieth century.

Books specifically about scenic design include Appelbaum's *The New York Stage*; Aronson's *American Set Design*; Blum's *A Pictorial History of the American Theatre, 1860–1976*; Burdick's (et al.) *Contemporary Stage Design, USA*; Hainaux's *Stage Design Throughout the World Since 1950*; Kienzle's *Modern World Theatre*; Larson's *Scene Design in the American Theatre from 1915 to 1960*; Owen's *Scenic Design on Broadway*; Rischbieter's *Art and the Stage in the Twentieth Century*; and Ronn Smith's *American Set Design 2*. Aronson's *American Set Design* contains critical essays on the work of John Lee Beatty, John Conklin, Karl Eigsti, Ralph Funicello, Marjorie Bradley Kellogg, Eugene Lee, Ming Cho Lee, Santo Loquasto, David Mitchell, Douglas Schmidt, and Robin Wagner. Smith's *American Set Design 2* contains interviews with Loy Arcenas, John Arnone, David Gropman, Robert Israel, Heidi Landesman (who changed her name to Heidi Ettinger in 1997), Hugh Landwehr, Adrienne Lobel, Charles McClennahan, Tony Straiges, George Tsypin, and Michael Yeagan. Both books contain many photographs. Unfortunately, no comparable books for either costume or lighting designers exist, so interviews with – as well as essays about – these designers must be searched for in various magazines (see below).

There are also a number of books by (or about) designers and design that can be very useful when studying American theatre production. These include Appia's *Music and the Art of the Theatre*; Craig's *On the Art of the Theatre, Scene, The Theatre Advancing*, and *Towards a New Theatre*, the latter two providing excellent introductions to the New Stagecraft; Bay's *Stage Design*; Robert Edmond Jones's *The Dramatic Imagination*; Mielziner's *Designing for the Theatre* (Mary C. Henderson has completed a yet unpublished biography of Mielziner); Oenslager's *Scenery Then and Now, Stage Design*, and *The Theatre of Donald Oenslager*; Pendleton's *The Theatre of Robert Edmond Jones*; Polakov's *We Live to Paint Again*; Rich's (with Lisa Aronson) *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson*; and Simonson's *The Art of Scenic Design: A Pictorial Analysis of Stage Setting and its Relation to Theatrical Productions and Part of a Lifetime*.

Other books that provide useful information relating to theatre design include Goldberg's *Performance: Live Art Since 1960*; McNamara, Rojo, and Schechner's *Theatres, Spaces, Environments*, which provides a very good introduction to environmental theatre; Morrow's *The Tony Award Book*; and Zeigler's *Regional Theatre*.

There are far fewer books about costume design, lighting design, and the designers who work in these disciplines. Even the general theatre histories listed above tend to devote more space to set design than to costume or lighting design. (There is much good, critical work to be found in theses and dissertations, of course, but space limitations prevent them from being listed here.) Books about costume design include the Andersons' *Costume Design*; Corey's *The Mask of Reality*; Owen's *Costume Design on Broadway: Designers and Their Credits, 1915–1985*; and Russell's *Stage Costume Design, Theory, Technique and Style*.

Books about lighting design include Bergman's *Lighting in the Theatre*; Hartmann's *Theatre Lighting*, useful as an historical record of early practice; Hay's *Light on the*

*Subject*; McCandless's *Method of Lighting the Stage* and *A Syllabus of Stage Lighting*; McCandless and Rubin's *Illuminating Engineering*; Owen's *Lighting Design on Broadway*; Palmer's *The Lighting Art*; Rosenthal and Wertenbaker's *The Magic of Light*; Rubin and Watson's *Theatrical Lighting Practice*; Selden and Sellman's *Stage Scenery and Lighting*; Sellman and Lesley's *Essentials of Stage Lighting*; and Lee Watson's *Lighting Design Handbook*.

The dissemination and documentation of new ideas about design through magazines cannot be overestimated. While some of the following publications are devoted exclusively to design, others may run only the occasional design article, which may (or not) be accompanied with one or two production shots. However, each magazine, in its own way, documents an art form that is, by definition, ephemeral, and thus provides a valuable service to future designers and scholars. Principal design publications include *Theatre Arts Magazine* (published between 1916 and 1948; also known as *Theatre Arts Monthly*); *Theatre Crafts* (which began publishing in 1967, and then in 1992 changed its name to TCI, for *Theatre Crafts International*); and *Theatre Design & Technology* (which the United States Institute for Theatre Technology began publishing in 1965). Other publications that occasionally cover design, but to a lesser extent, include *American Theatre* (published by Theatre Communications Group), *Back Stage*, *The Drama Review (TDR)*, *Dramatists Quarterly*, *Lighting Dimensions*, *Other Stages*, *Performing Arts Journal (PAJ)*, *Playbill*, *Studies in American Drama 1945–Present*, *Theater*, *Theatre Annual*, *Theatre Profiles* (published annually by Theatre Communications Group), *Theatre Guild Magazine*, *Theatre Journal* (and *Educational Theatre Journal*), *Theatre Survey*, *TheatreWeek* (succeeded by *InTheatre*), *Theatre World* (published annually since 1943), and *Variety*.

Finally, coverage of theatre architecture, in addition to Wilmeth and Miller, *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, McNamara, Rojo and Schechner, *Theatres, Spaces, Environments*, Izenour's *Theater Design*, and Mary C. Henderson's *Theater in America*, can be found in Young's *Famous American Playhouses*, as well as standard histories of the theatre building, such as Mullin's *The Development of the Playhouse*. A fascinating recent study, providing some insight into American theatres (such as Lincoln Center) but more specifically suggesting ways to look at theatres as semiotic objects, is Carlson's *Places of Performance*. Lincoln Center, along with general ideas of theatre architecture, is discussed in Mielziner's *The Shapes of Our Theatre*, in Mary C. Henderson's forthcoming biography of Mielziner, and in Ralph Martin's *Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts*. Visionary ideas from the early sixties can be seen in *The Ideal Theater*, edited by Cogswell, while actual design of the period is covered in Silverman's *Contemporary Theatre Architecture*; design of the seventies is dealt with in *Theatre Design 75*, edited by Frink. The possibilities of reclaiming older theatres today as seen through the history and total restoration of The New Amsterdam on New York's Forty-Second Street (part of the mammoth restoration of this theatre district in the nineties) is beautifully told and illustrated in Mary C. Henderson's *The New Amsterdam*. Sources on both architecture and design, though now dated, can be found in the recommended annotated lists by Stoddard, *Theatre and Cinema Architecture*, as well as in Silvester's *United States Theatre*. Frequently, the best coverage of theatre architecture can be found in technical theatre journals, mentioned above, as well as such architectural journals as *Architectural Record* (see, for example, the November 1969 issue on the Milwaukee Center for the Performing Arts and the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts at the University of Illinois), *Architectural Design*, and *Journal of the American Institute of American Architecture*.