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Trends in Contemporary Theatre Architecture

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by Hans Curjel

Since the second world war burning questions have arisen concerning theatre architecture not only because of the large number of theatres that had to be rebuilt in the ruined towns—a wonderful chance that has not been fully exploited—but because of the convergence of research tending towards a refashioning of dramatic art and architecture. It is true to say that the majority of those occupied in the theatre—playwrights and stage directors—are still traditionalists, but nevertheless progressive forces are strikingly apparent; Scharoun's project for Kassel and Mies van der Rohe's for Mannheim are both examples in this respect. Unfortunately neither have been realised, but nevertheless they have helped to inspire such existent entities as the Mannheim National Theatre (Gerhard Weber) and the Ruhnau project for Munster and Gelsenkirchen. In place of the Italian stage the modern designers are tending to substitute a spatial synthesis that will integrate the audience in the dramatic reality. It seems that today the best solution is to be found in the establishment of theatres endowed with a number of possibilities so that, according to the case, they can have an Italian stage, one in the body of the theatre, theatre in the round, arena, etc.

Kalita Humphrey's Theater, Dallas, Texas

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Architect: F. L. Wright, carried out posthumously, 1960

Although in principle a supporter of theatre in the round, F. L. W. contents himself here with a semi-circle. Main idea—maximum symbiosis of stage and audience collectivity. The decors are more plastic than pictorial—444 seats.

Stratford Shakespeare Festival Theater, Stratford, Ontario, Canada

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Architect: Rounthwaite & Fairfield

Theatre holding 2,200 seats. According to the Elizabethan principle, the stage projects into the semi-circular auditorium. A daring innovation is to be found in the placing of the orchestra in a gallery above the floor of the stage. All architectural "effect" has been avoided; the "theatrical atmosphere" results from the intimate mingling of stage and auditorium.

Municipal Theatre in Gelsenkirchen

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1959. Architects: W. Ruhnau, O. Rave, M. von Hausen

This theatre, which holds 1,050 seats, is certainly the most successful of modern theatre architecture; it also contains a "studio" with from 380 to 450 seats and is designed with an eye to flexibility, mobility and integration with its surroundings (glass walls).

The Architect's Point of View

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by Werner Ruhnau

Stemming from Gropius' idea that the theatre, eliminating the introversion of the Italian stage, must be a "spatial and visual keyboard" serving the free integration of the public and the performance, W. R. lays down in principle (and in fact: Münster, Gelsenkirchen, etc.) that flexibility, relations with the outside world and dynamism must be brought to a maximum.

Inquiry concerning Theatre Architecture

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The inquiry undertaken by WERK touched on four questions: 1. Does the Italian stage correspond to trends in modern theatre or is this truer of what is called the "spatial synthesis" of stage and auditorium? 2. Can modern architecture create a theatrical atmosphere? 3. What optical consequences as regards the stage may come about as a result of the principles of abstract art? 4. As regards architecture and the relationship between stage and auditorium, what importance should be attached to certain techniques employed in the theatre of today—lighting effects and acoustic techniques?

Professor H. H. Stuckenschmidt of Berlin thinks that every theatre should offer two possibilities: Italian stage and spatial synthesis,—that modern architecture, if it is good, is suitable for the theatre,—and that all forms and technical means are welcome if they serve the works played. Kurt Hirschfeld, stage director and director of the Zurich Schauspielhaus, finds it more difficult to reply to a question entailing two enigmas than to solve an equation with two unknowns. First enigma or unknown: "Trends in modern theatre" (the one modern dramaturgy having been put through its paces on the Italian stage); the second unknown: "spatial synthesis", which remains to be defined. Large municipal

theatres should be built for the Italian stage and, in addition, small ones that will allow for all forms of experimentation.—Werner Duggelin, stage director, Vienna, accepts all the possibilities open in the modern theatre provided that they are not employed at any price and insists on the plastic importance of lateral lighting and stereophonic acoustics; finally, when any theatre is being built, a stage director, a lighting director and an acoustic engineer ought to be consulted. Eugene Ionesco, the playwright, thinks first of all of the works and not of the auditorium, for it is the works performed that will shape new theatres. Vladimir Vogel, composer, Ascona, remarks that the majority of lyrical works have been intended for the Italian stage; only certain works coming from the "mysteries" or from a romantic source of inspiration (Wagner, Verdi) could be adapted to the "spatial synthesis". On the other hand, the happy distinction made in Milan between the "Grande" and the "Piccola Scala" leads us to hope that all new theatres will be equipped with two stages and concurrent performances.

The Stage Designer's Point of View

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by Teo Otto

Technique is good when it helps and economizes, whereas, today, it generally gets in the way and exaggerates.—"Spatial synthesis" is one possibility among many others. The fact of the matter is that the true union between a work and the public essentially depends, not on technical and architectural measures, but on the spectacle of actors addressing one another and not an anonymous mass.

Teatro Castro Alves, Salvador, Bahia

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Architect: J. B. Fonyat Filho and collaborators

This theatre, which was first thought of in 1957 and has now been realized, strikes one as being completely lucid and functional. Corresponding to the trapezoidal stage there is an auditorium of the same shape holding 1,600 seats, the farthest removed of which is no more than fifty metres from the stage. The audience come into the theatre by way of an open ramp which ends in the middle of the auditorium.

Hechtplatz Theatre, Zurich

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Ernst Gisel, architect FAS/SIA, Zurich, in collaboration with E. Meyer, architect, and H. Cuhel, engineer, Zurich

A small theatre (220–260 seats) set in part of an ensemble of colonnaded neo-classical boutiques. The exterior has been almost entirely preserved. The stage can be extended in three stages into the auditorium. The stage and public entrance are kept at the level of the street, which welcomes the audience during the intervals.

Studio of the Berlin Academy of the Fine Arts

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Architect: W. Düttmann, Berlin

Very different from the old academy on Pariserplatz, the present one is an entity composed of functionally differentiated buildings, the studio having a distinctly experimental character. The irregularly trapezoidal stage can open out towards a small (198 seats) or large parterre (374–431 seats). The deliberate primitiveness of the technical means and the very great flexibility meet to a very large degree the idea of "spontaneous theatre" along the lines proposed by Le Corbusier.

The Acoustic Engineer's Point of View

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by Professor Fritz Winckel

The perfect acoustics of the theatres and amphitheatres of the ancient world resulted from an extremely accurate technique that we could at least equal today by the correct utilization of modern acoustic methods; these, moreover, are best employed in any theatre that synthesizes the stage and the auditorium.

Stage Experiments

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By way of introduction to the Aphorisms of Mariette von Meyenburg, themselves so modern but unfortunately impossible to summarize, H. C. briefly indicates what constitutes a current theatrical style, both complemented and inspired by experiments ranging from Kandinsky and Moholy-Nagy to J. Polier and Tinguely.

N.B. As regards the examples and projects we have had to omit here, the mass of material at hand forces us to request the reader to refer to the illustrations and captions in the present number.