

DESIGNS FOR THE STAGE

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Shakespeare simply wrote 'a blasted heath' and you have to get on with it; Shaw, at the start of *Pygmalion*, tells you not only what church his characters are standing outside (St Paul's Covent Garden, and don't get it mixed up with the cathedral, he adds) but which pillars they are standing between. In each case, though, the theatre designer knows more or less where he or she stands, and it is not an especially flattering or fruitful position.

The theatre is a uniquely collaborative art form in which no single person 'owns' the production; yet more often than not the designer is a hired hand brought in to serve somebody else's imagination - the director, writer or even actor. As a result the British theatre in general has design work that is technically superb, often spectacular to look at, but very rarely of any importance in initiating a corporate work of art; yet the designer may have more training and more ambition in specifically art matters than anybody else involved.

It does not have to be this way. They order things differently at Glasgow Citizens' theatre, significantly the company that looks towards Europe more than any other British theatre; but the eye-opener for me was the Caspar Neher exhibition mounted by the Arts Council at the Riverside Studios in London and now on tour (to Manchester, then Sheffield and Plymouth).

As a writer working in regional reps your awareness of designers is limited, quite often, to somebody you have never met pestering you for a script of something you haven't finished; when the traumatic first

read-through arrives everybody is too worried about what kind of impression they are making on everybody else to make more than conventionally admiring noises about the neat model of the set the designer has brought along. And that, very often, is the end of useful contact.

As a critic you tend to notice the set when it goes radically wrong or when it is far and away the most interesting thing around.

This is currently the case in at least two major attractions in London. In *Mutiny!* William Dudley's recreation of the good ship *Bounty* is said to be capable of making people feel seasick. In *Starlight Express*, John Napier's quarter-mile of roller-skating track and 60 tons of steelwork turn a pleasantly banal occasion into a lavishly banal occasion.

Caspar Neher was Brecht's designer. They were close friends, having been at school together; Neher may have had a slight edge in authority because unlike Brecht he fought in the trenches in the First World War. In any event, he played a major part in the revolution Brecht's informal collective wrought in world theatre. That style of production we call Brechtian - all the actors sitting round the edge of the acting area when they aren't taking part in a scene, all the props laid out for the audience to see, information projected onto screens so that the audience doesn't get 'carried away' by the emotional tide of what it is watching - is all there in Neher's drawings. So are the plain, even sombre, colourings.

More significant still, I suspect, is Neher's habit of drawing not only set designs but illustrations of action. This includes, for instance, Mrs Peachum tipling for the film version of *The Threepenny Opera*; this is not a design but a characterisation. It includes too a drawing of Surabaya Johnny, a rogue who never appears in *Happy End* but who is the subject of one of the most memorable songs of Brecht and Weill; was he in some early version or does this tell the actress what she needs to know about singing it? For Neher was not only a designer but sometimes co-director too.

The exhibition has many shortcomings: it asserts but does not show us that Neher worked less interestingly under the Nazis



Mrs Celia Peachum drinking Cordial Medoc; Neher's design for *The Threepenny Opera*.

when his work apparently paid tribute to the architecture of Albert Speer. And it should not persuade anybody that Brechtian staging is the only way forward - that too was a product of its time, a reaction against both Expressionism and German Romanticism. It does suggest a way of working that we would be foolish to overlook, however.

The big national companies in Britain, and to a lesser extent the larger regional reps, do permit the building of relationships between director and designer and writer (except where the last-named is dead, as he/she frequently is). The productive team of Adrian Noble and Bob Crowley at the Royal Shakespeare Company where the often difficult text of *Measure for Measure* was unknotted for many of us by the striking exploration of its imagery is a case in point. The extent to which visual creativity has been shut out of the British theatre has, in my guess, been partly responsible for the explosion of interest in performance art in the art colleges, a form which can be funny, spectacular and disturbing but whose content, like those 19th century plays, nobody remembers.

Considering how much of the ideology and organisation of the big subsidised theatres is derived from Brechtian ideas, and specifically the first postwar visit to Britain of the Berliner Ensemble, we are taking a long time to learn.



Neher's stage set for *The Alabama Song from the Little Mahogony* (Brecht & Weill).