

TIME MARCHES INTO THE 2003 PRAQUE QUADRENNIAL

By Richard K. Thomas

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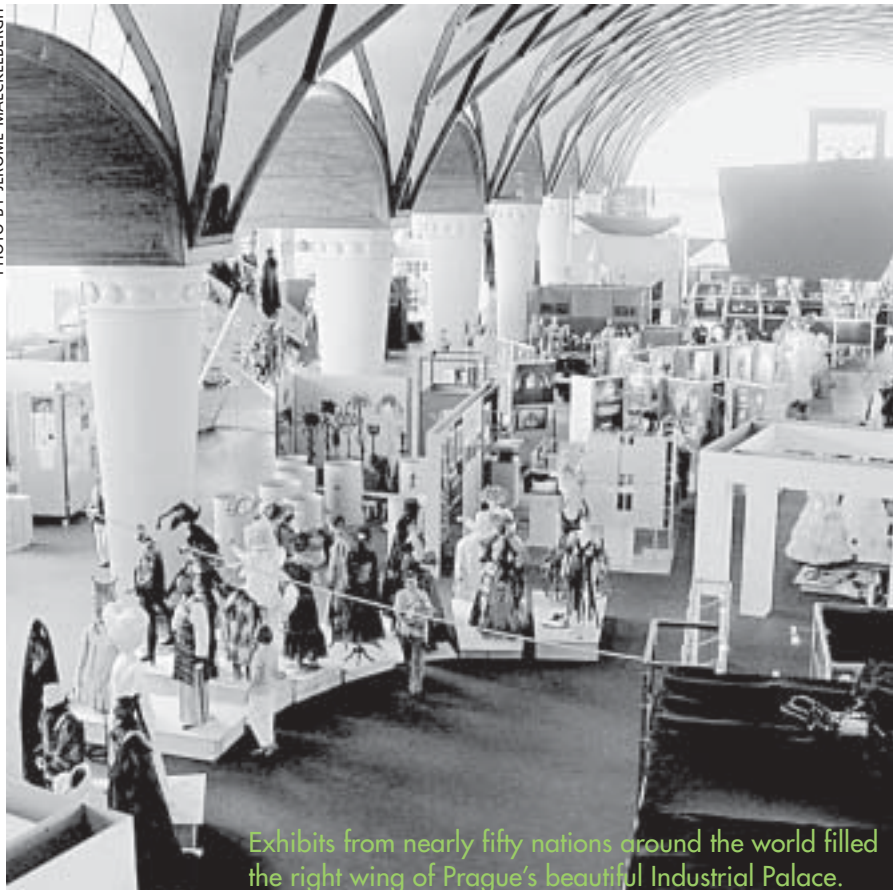
by richard k. thomas

Time was that the Prague Quadrennial celebrated the glorious art of space in the theatre. Created in 1967, nine successive exhibitions, one every four years, gathered in one *space* the finest examples of scenography from leading theatre designers around the world.

The space itself—the Industrial Palace at the Výstavšitü Exhibition Grounds in Prague, Czech Republic—is breathtaking. The PQ exhibition, for over thirty years the only one of its kind in the world, has undoubtedly become a major factor in shaping the direction of world theatre. Yet everyone involved readily acknowledges that there is an extraordinary difference between two-dimensional renderings, or three-dimensional models, or even exhibiting the costumes or major scenic pieces themselves, and the theatre experience that defines our art form. One of the main differences between these types of exhibitions and a fuller communication of the theatre experience lies in the difficulty of presenting *time* in an exhibition. The most overwhelming difference between past exhibitions and this year's tenth Prague Quadrennial was the myriad ways in which participants attempted to share a more complete theatre experience with the world by integrating the fourth dimension, time, into their presentations.

Examples of exhibitions that utilized time in their presentations were everywhere. Video monitors popped up in many of the national and student exhibitions, with videotaped recordings of live performances attempting to provide a better communication of the theatre experience than traditionally static renderings and models. These exhibitions provide an interesting shift in the use of *three* dimensions, sacrificing the third spatial dimension (depth) that makes the exhibition of models so compelling to allow static images to move in what is commonly thought to be the fourth dimension, time.

PHOTO BY JEROME MAECKELBERGH



Exhibits from nearly fifty nations around the world filled the right wing of Prague's beautiful Industrial Palace.

Bulgarian students participated in the "Design as Performance" program.



PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR EXCEPT AS NOTED



Yossi Mar Chaim from Israel demonstrated using MIDI to synchronize lights and music in time.

Still, time itself often proved to be the enemy of many of these exhibits; if a picture is worth a 1000 words, how much time does it take to replace a picture by speaking 1000 words? In a spatial world, visitors to the PQ exhibits can digest hundreds of spatial exhibits in a very short amount of time. Introduce time into an exhibit, and we are now asking our visitors to invest a very precious commodity, time, into experiencing that exhibit, and we typically don't create an environment conducive to spending significant amounts of time with each exhibit. Many exhibitors, anticipating this dilemma, attempted to create exhibits that addressed this conundrum.

Perhaps the most successful of these was the colossal exhibit of the Netherlands that featured comfortable seating in front of video monitors playing short audio/video presentations of the designs for a number of site-specific theatre productions. By making the visitor comfortable, and keeping the presentation of each artist short, the Netherlands created a space that was very conducive to an exploration of time. The success of this exhibit did not go unnoticed, as the PQ Jury awarded a special Silver Medal to the Netherlands theatre exhibit "for its modern approach in presenting vital contemporary theatre."

Some of the most exciting exhibitions at the PQ made use of all four dimensions. Of course, when we experience all four dimensions, we start getting very close to experiencing the theatre performance itself, as was evidenced in two significant events at the PQ.

The Heart of PQ occupied the entire center section of the Industrial Palace, and contained interactive exhibitions and performances throughout the course of the exhibition. The stunning labyrinth of architectural spaces, designed by architect Dorita Hannah provided a virtual laboratory for an exploration of the five human senses.

PHOTO BY ALEXANDRA BONDS



The exhibit from the Netherlands had comfortable seating that facilitated watching, and listening to, video presentations.

The Heart of the PQ presented a never ending array of performance art and other presentations, often having several performances occurring at the same time in the same space. Here, the theatre was predominantly being created in real time, rather than being a recreation of a theatre production from another place and time. The cutting edge nature of the Heart of PQ provided a constant challenge to its visitors to question their own assumptions about the nature of theatrical performance.



The USA exhibit, recipient of a special honorary diploma for its inclusivity and internationalism.



PHOTO BY BOB SCHMIDT



PQs opening ceremonies featured a visual nod to the art of listening.

In the right wing of the Industrial Palace, however, a very different type of “four dimensional exhibition” epitomized the trend to include time as an integral component of the Prague Quadrennial. There, on a large makeshift stage, students were invited to participate in the OISTAT Summer Scenofest. Organized by Michael Ramsaur and the Education Commission of OISTAT, the Scenofest stage contained an endless variety of lectures, sound and light demonstrations, and other programs.

Among these was a series of performances called “Design as Performance,” organized by Ramsaur with help from British scenographer Pamela Howard, in which short designer-led pieces demonstrated the integration of scenography, light, sound, and performers, and focused on using a performance as a way of creating design.

The atmosphere of the 2003 Prague Quadrennial provided the perfect opportunity for theatre sound design and music composition to make a grand entrance. Sonic arts are certainly to time what the visual arts are to space. Sound and sight complement each other in theatrical performance, and one wonders how such a prestigious exhibition of theatre design could have taken place for over three decades without including the predominantly temporal aspect of sound.

Certainly the Heart of the PQ celebrated sound as an art



A performer in one of the Heart of PQ’s sensory events swings a mic that feeds the live auditory environment.

form in its own right. In this space, blindfolded visitors were encouraged to *listen* to the unique soundscapes that permeated the central hall of the Industrial Palace. Inside the “Tower of Sound,” designed by Sachyo Takahashi and Ryuzo Fukuhara, visitors listened to the sound of their own heart-beat through stethoscopes in striking counterpoint to drums that filled the external world. And at night, special events dominated, such as the techno music that filled the air one night as costume designers from around the world created extraordinary fashions out of debris gathered from around the Industrial Palace.

For eighteen days and nights, a never ending but always evolving soundscape permeated the Heart of the PQ. From tiny personal sounds, to pounding and inescapable cacophonies that sometimes dominated the space, the Heart of the PQ beat to the rhythm of sound. It is hard to imagine a successful Heart without the pulse provided by the sound designs.



Composer and director, Heiner Goebbels (second from left) talks with Scenofest participants.

Meanwhile, in the left wing of the Industrial Palace, about fifty nations provided outstanding examples of design works created in their respective countries over the last four years. Music composition and sound design appeared here and there throughout the national exhibitions, but the United States exhibit prominently featured, for the very first time, examples of outstanding compositions and sound designs. Visitors to the exhibit received small audio players that contained high quality sound scores from twelve composers and designers, ranging from Elton John's musical score for the Broadway production of *Aida*, to Peter Kater's haunting score for *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, to Willy Schwarz's ethnically influenced score for Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses*, to Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen's supersonic collage for the Steppenwolf production of *Valparaiso*. The United States exhibition was awarded a Special Honorary Mention Award for its *inclusivity* and internationalism.

But it was the right wing of the Industrial Palace that hosted the largest array of sonic stimuli at the 2003 Prague Quadrennial. Home to the student exhibition, the architecture exhibition and Scenofest, the right wing was consistently a cacophony of intriguing sounds, creating an excitement and life that was hard to match elsewhere in the PQ.

The OISTAT Sound Working Group organized the *First International Sound Score and Music Composition Exhibition*, featuring nineteen widely diverse exhibits from twelve countries. Highlights include scores by Eldad Lidor and Yossi Mar Chaim from Israel, by Eric Zoran from Yugoslavia, by Ross Brown and Gregg Fisher from the United Kingdom, by Jethro Joaquin from the Philippines, and by Assen Avrimov from Bulgaria.

There were many Scenofest programs in which the timely art of sound took centerstage. For instance, internationally acclaimed composer and director Heiner Goebbels spoke about, and shared examples of, some of his critically acclaimed works for theatre, including *Max Black* and *Hasbirigaki*.



Blindfolded, the audience experiences *Theatre in the Dark*, created by students at Central School of London.



Music students play their stunning music score in the background as the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama Puppet Theatre performs *Wide Awake and Dreaming*.

Goebbels often works with contrasting styles, as exemplified in the juxtaposition of African (Senegalese) and Western music and instruments in his music theatre piece, *Or the Hapless Landing*.

In some presentations auditory space replaced visual space altogether. The Central School of London presented *Theatre in the Dark*, in which a blindfolded audience was seated in the middle of the performance space while sonic artists used natural sounds and acoustic instruments to create a performance around them.

In other presentations, the visual component of the presentation was clearly inspired and influenced by the sound presentation. One of the more exciting of these was the *Theatre Orchestra of Finland*, presented by the sound and lighting students from the Theatre Academy of Finland. Inspired by Steve Reich, the Orchestra featured a giant pendulum from which a microphone was suspended. The microphone passed over eight loudspeakers, each playing back a different track from a multi track tape recorder. Meanwhile six musicians performed on a



Theatre Orchestra of Finland, created by the lighting and sound students at the Theatre Academy of Finland, featured a microphone on a swinging pendulum and six musicians playing a variety of electronic instruments.



Siegwulf Turek (right) demonstrated his mammoth fountains and projected laser light.



variety of electronic instruments that included vinyl records, signal processors, and synthesizers. In the middle of it all, the sound mixer controlled the various instruments from a position seated in the middle of the orchestra.

After its Scenofest debut, the pendulum exhibit became part of the general student exhibition at PQ and could be found tucked away at the rear of the right wing of the Industrial Palace. Next to it, another exhibit from the Theatre Academy of Finland, called Galleries, featured several loudspeakers “displayed” along a corridor, each fed with its own unique sound source.

The partnership that sound and lighting share in the performing arts was further celebrated in the work of Siegwulf Turek, whose spectaculars have become well known throughout Europe. Combining laser projections and mammoth fountains with water jets dancing in glorious synchronization to classical and popular music, Siegwulf’s creations demonstrated the magnificent marriage possible between time and space in art.

Acclaimed Israeli composer, Yossi Mar Chaim also demonstrated some of his recent experiments with lighting and music, and demonstrated compositions that he created with Israeli lighting designer, Hadas Eilon, using the MIDI protocol to communicate between lighting and sound instruments. Yossi also talked about the artistic aspects of show control and showed clips from two of his productions, *View*, by Adina Bar, and *Medea* by Yafa Mor.

Steven Brown proved that sound wasn’t purely a time art in a demonstration of his unique approach to surround sound techniques at the Royal Exchange Theatre Company in



David Swenson (left) and Jesse Dreikosen from Purdue University presented *King Lear* at *Ground Zero*.



PHOTO BY CHRISTA D'ANS



Steven Brown demonstrated his complex surround sound techniques.



Jon Gottlieb talked about taking *King Lear* to France.



A hot jazz band played as the demon head burned.



Composer Vladmir Franz spoke about *Hercules*, his 100th work for theatre.



PHOTO BY CHRISTA D'ANS



For the day-long workshop, Fiesta of Fire, a demon head was built, filled with personal objects and then burned.



Manchester England. This is not your ordinary 5.1 movie theatre system. Steven typically uses systems that employ dozens of surround loudspeakers, covering the audience from not only overhead, but from the top, middle and bottom on all sides surrounding the audience.

One of the Czech Republic's finest composers and native sons, Vladmir Franz shared with an enthusiastic Scenofest audience a performance of *Hercules*, his one hundredth work for theatre. Vladmir chose a small Czech experimental theatre group, appropriately named *Multispace*, to develop this special piece. He collaborated with Czech playwright Miroslav Bambusek to create a stage oratorio, which he described as a "scenic and dramatic form where the emphasis is put on a mutual proportionality and a balance between the dramatic component of the performance...and the musical performance." Vladmir described the two components as acting "individually, even relatively independently... rather about expressing one's attitude towards a certain matter in two different ways. By bringing these ways closer and further from each other and by their mutual interaction and correlation, a kind of inner tension is created, where difference and at the same time unity can coexist, similarly to the black and white colours in the jin-jang symbol." Here was a marvelous demonstration of the emerging esprit de corps between sound and sight, time and space that flourished at this year's PQ.

The United States brought two presentations to Scenofest, curiously both related to Shakespeare's monumental play, *King Lear*. Jon Gottlieb talked about the challenges of transporting the sound design for the highly acclaimed Cal Arts production to France, and a team of visual and sound designers

from Purdue University, headed by David Swenson and Jesse Dreikosen, demonstrated the sound and multimedia design for their project, *King Lear at Ground Zero*.

The "Design as Performance" program culminated in a marvelous celebration of St. John the Baptist day, presented by the Institut del Teatre's students from Barcelona. On June 24th, Midsummer's Day, Joan Guillen of Els Comediants in Barcelona led an extraordinary all day workshop that climaxed in an open air Fiesta of Fire. Participants made masks and costumes, and built a massive demonic head outside the front entrance of the Industrial Palace. As night fell, each participant placed a personal item inside the giant mask on a pyre of wood. The crowd cheered as the pyre was ignited, and if the bonfire wasn't hot enough, a jazz band played even hotter music well into the night.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of theatre artists from around the world put an enormous effort into transforming the Industrial Palace into a three-dimensional *space* worthy of a theatrical celebration of this magnitude. Perhaps 2003 will be remembered as the year when that other critical dimension of the theatre experience found a new home at the Prague Quadrennial. And for many, the result was a most memorable *time*. ❖

Rick Thomas contributes regularly to TD&T. His article, "The Function of the Soundscape" received the 2002 Herbert D. Greggs Award for writing excellence in TD&T. He is professor of theatre sound at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana.