

COMPTE RENDU / BOOK REVIEW

NATALIE REWA

Scenography in Canada: Selected Designers.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. 249 pp. Illus., index.

JENNIFER WISE

European cities like Berlin have always made me swoon with theatre-envy—not only because of their hip young audiences, their tradition of rigorous dramaturgy, their international repertoires, and their rich subsidies, but also because of what one finds in their shops and lobbies: a vast array of glamorous books and magazines on theatre's visual aspect, on scenography. We in Canada by comparison publish next to nothing on the subject. If this was ever tolerable, it's been inexcusable for years: Canadian scenography is increasingly visible internationally, and the services of our modern-day Bibiena, Michael Levine, are in demand from London to Paris to New York. Luckily for us, there is at least one exception to the Canadian rule: Natalie Rewa's handsome, lusciously illustrated *Scenography in Canada: Selected Designers*.

This sumptuous book pays magnificent tribute to the stage, lighting, and costume designs of seven Canadian scenographers: Astrid Janson, Susan Benson, Mary Kerr, Jim Plaxton, Michael Levine, Ken MacDonald, and Teresa Przybylski. It does so in the form of 207 superbly printed images drawn from the artists' photo-archives, sketchbooks, maquettes, lighting plots, and costume-boards. Together these images span the quarter-century between Kerr's *Stag King* (1972) and Plaxton's *Life and Times of Brian Mulroney* (1999). They document designs undertaken not only for large- and small-scale plays, operas, musicals and ballets, but also for civic ceremonies, expositions, and installations.

Rewa has aimed above all to pay homage to the creative processes of these seven scenographers, as well as to exemplify the range and excellence of late-twentieth-century Canadian stage design. The small number of artists represented, and the absence of any French Canadians among them, will make the second of these aims the tougher one to fulfill to every reader's satisfaction. My hope, however, is that Rewa simply isn't finished yet, and that *Scenography in Canada* will turn out to be the first in a distinguished series.

The book's first section is a 106-page portfolio of glossy, well-

spaced images, most printed in deeply-saturated colour. What a treat—for theatre educators, what a godsend!—to have at one's fingertips so much visual evidence of the inventiveness of the Canadian theatrical imagination. Because of the way their work was originally documented, some of the artists are arguably better served here than others. For example, Michael Levine's maquettes and sets, all of which include the performer's body as an integral element, communicate their theatricality with an immediacy that can't be matched by the designs of those who photographed their work void of actors or any other markers of human scale. Ken MacDonald's playfully warped proportions and perspectives just cannot be fully appreciated when empty, without any actors' bodies present, and the muscular monuments of Jim Plaxton are sometimes compromised here for the same reason. And while the drawings and paintings of Teresa Przybylski are among the most beautiful images in the book, the shortage of photographic documentation of her work as realized on the stage hampers our ability to gauge her achievement as a scenographer. But there are ravishing and inspiring ideas to be found in each of the designers' portfolios without exception.

Section two (p.107—118) provides the images' captions. The show, its director, venue(s), and date(s) are identified, and sometimes the performers as well.

Section three (p.119—213) alternates between Rewa's biographical and descriptive essays, and block-quoted statements by the artists themselves. The latter are particularly absorbing, full of juicy details about the genesis of shows and the featured artists' creative processes. For example, we learn of occasions on which the designer's initial idea had to be scrapped—either because the director saw things differently (Susan Benson's *Guys and Dolls*), for technical reasons (Levine's *Onegin*), or simply because it was displaced by a better concept (MacDonald's *White Biting Dog*). The diversity of approach from one artist to the next is striking, but so is the recurrence of certain themes and techniques that seem to unify the work of many of these Canadian scenographers: the search for the big metaphor, the impulse to incorporate the entire architecture of the playing space into the design, and the witty use of postindustrial materials such as household plastics, clothing, paper, and cardboard in the building of large functional structures.

Rewa's own creative contributions to this wonderful book are many, beginning with the genius of her having conceived of it in the first place. Her fine scholarship is apparent throughout, not

only in her catholic selection of shows and materials and her nicely detailed essays, but also in her endnotes, which contain encyclopedic lists of all productions designed by the featured artists for a given theatre, with a given collaborator, or within a particular genre. Her sensitive commentaries avoid obtrusive theorizing and strive modestly to articulate the distinctive features of each artist's idiosyncratic vision and method. And her general introduction, a pithy account of Canadian scenography from the Massey report (1951) to the 1999 Prague Quadrennial, is an instant classic, easily proving that the story of theatre in this country need not be told in terms of directors, performers, or texts, but can just as revealingly be told in terms of *spaces*.

Because I'm serious about a sequel or a series, a few suggestions to the editors at University of Toronto Press are worth making. Organizationally speaking, this is not a user-friendly book. It lacks a general index (for locating plays), as well as any apparent logic in the arrangement of the artists and their work. Why do the pictures leap back and forth in time—in Astrid Janson's case, from 1993 to '91 to '97 to '74 to '77 to '93 to '95 to '98 to '80 to '98 to '86? And why does the book begin with Janson anyway? Some of Mary Kerr's designs predate both hers and those of Susan Benson, who is placed second. Lacking even such basic orienting facts as the artists' birth-dates, the book seems to suffer from, and at times induces, a sort of temporal dyslexia. Not only are we deprived of the opportunity to see the artists develop, but Benson, for example, is put in the position of appearing to contradict herself, for she makes chronological statements which are then printed out of order. A more sequential approach would be welcome in future issues.

The decision to print the pictures without any captions was also not a good one and should not be repeated. Many of the images are, after all, totally abstract. They are numbered, yes, but the commentaries that discuss and explain them are not. How are we supposed to connect the two? With untitled images and unnumbered essays, there's simply no straightforward way of finding the illustrations for a show that we're reading about. (And it doesn't help that the commentaries for *Nabucco* and *Tectonic Plates*, as well as for *Anatol* and *Hamlet*, are printed in reverse order.) Footnotes (rather than endnotes) would also be much appreciated, as it does feel onerous to have to flip constantly between *four* separate sections of a book in order to use it.

As for the hoped-for second volume of *Scenography in Canada*, Rewa has already provided lists of possible subjects on

pages 122 and 127: Michael Eagan, Debra Hanson, Sue LePage, Martha Mann, Cameron Porteous, Phillip Silver, Allan Stichbury, and Guido Tondino, to name just a few (and to which we might add Louise Campeau and Dany Lyne). And then there'll be Volume Three to think about. But for now, deep thanks to Natalie Rewa for this luminous and necessary book, with its seven compelling reasons to feel proud of our own theatre—and transcend at least some of that old Berlin-envy.