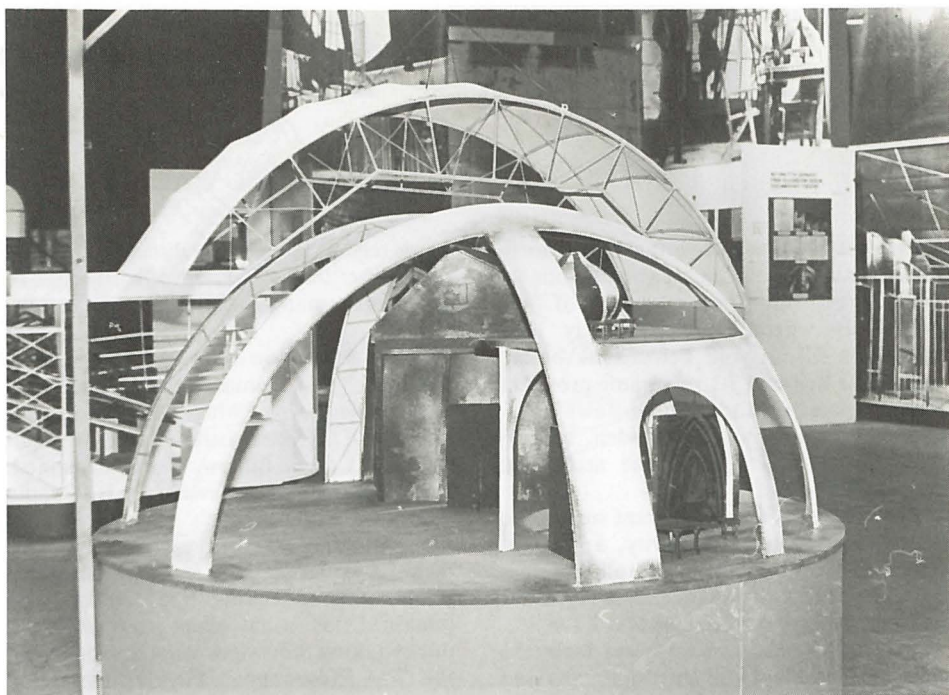


Model of the Erwin Piscator set for "Rasputin" from the exhibition at Riverside Studios.



play 'The Good Soldier Schweik', one of a very different calibre, Piscator contrived another of his 'firsts', setting his characters and sometimes bits of scenery on two moving conveyor-belts flush with the stage, so that Schweik, without moving, would seem to be continually plodding on against his fate. Simultaneously, on a cinema screen behind him, animated drawings by George Grosz (who also did the sets and costumes. Brecht worked on the script) depicted Schweik's encounters and attitudes.

In fact, between about 1925 and 1931, Piscator's innovations in design and staging *all* seem to be firsts. His use of 'functional' scenery built from scaffolding, his juxtapositions of assymetrical staircases and

steps, his introduction of geodetic domes, cantilevered gantries, split-level staging, his exploitation of film screens on stage were all innovations in the theatre. So were his ideas on lighting. The designer Hans Ulrich Schmückle (who worked with Piscator when he returned to a rather blasé and unwelcoming Berlin in the '50s after his

busy exile in New York, where he founded the Dramatic Workshop) has drawn attention to his absorption in the subject. Piscator wrote: 'Whenever light-space is constructed it begins by creating completely new laws . . . in terms of gesture, mime, movement and possibly even language. The whole technique of the theatre will have to subordinate itself to lighting . . . the light-stage can create X-ray pictures of art.' To prove it Piscator and Schmückle began to floor their stages with glass, using thousands of bulbs to eliminate shadows from faces and gestures so that each feature and each movement was in effect bathed in light. They used the system several times, notably in a production of Arthur Miller's 'The Crucible' at Tübingen in 1954, and a year later for a production of Tolstoy's 'War and Peace' at Darmstadt.

Paradoxically, Piscator's continuing preoccupation with what have to be called 'tricks' of stagecraft was based on an intention to clarify and bring 'reality' to a message rather than to create illusions or extend a fantasy. Only a deeply committed student of agit-prop would be qualified to say, perhaps, whether he succeeded in his political aims for his total theatre. What remains of his work (Erwin Piscator died in 1966) is a compendium of multi-media ideas and prototypes of presentation from which countless directors and producers have borrowed.

I can remember myself thinking 'that's a Piscator' of aspects of productions as dissimilar as 'The Skin of Our Teeth' in the late forties, 'Oh what a lovely war' in the late fifties, 'Evita' in the late seventies. But the most Piscatoresque production I ever saw was one afternoon at the Radio City Music Hall in New York when not just the stage but the whole auditorium was suddenly filled with marching marines, clock-work kicking Rockettes, a whole symphony orchestra and, suddenly rumbling across the stage, three *real* tanks. That was a pretty real message too.

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