

# The Saga of Prague

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1976 started a month late in Prague, and by so doing considerably advanced both the international status and the self esteem of the British theatre designer.

To explain: in the '60s the Czech Ministry of Culture had instituted an international exhibition of theatre design and architecture in Prague. Work from all over the world would be shown, and it would be competitive with prizes awarded by an international jury. It would also recur every four years and be called the Prague Quadrennial or PQ.

The early PQ's took place without British participation. The reason for this was that although British designers were producing some of the most exciting and innovative work yet seen, there was no effective organisation in this country which could, or at least was prepared to, get together a British entry which could properly represent the many directions in which British design flourished, and shoulder the work necessary to fund, ship and display the exhibits. To be sure, an embryo designers' society was in being, but its membership was minimal and it had anyway set its central task as bettering the conditions of employment of British designers.

However as each succeeding PQ took

ceding congresses of the theatre designers' and technicians' international body, l'Organisation Internationale des Scénographes et Techniciens de Théâtre (OISTT), whose secretariat is Prague based. PQ was missing us, and we were missing out.

One of those who knew that our apparent insularity must be brought to an end was John Bury, the National Theatre's Head of Design, and then as now the motor power of the British designers' search for improved status and recognition, and a passionate believer that theatre should be a comprehensible and rewarding experience, transcending both language and national boundaries. With Ralph Koltai, and the team of Timothy O'Brien and Tazeena Firth, all disciples to the cause, he decided that there must be a British presence in Prague at the PQ in 1975. Since no organisation existed to do the job, they would simply go themselves with their own work, raising the ever necessary finances as they went and persuading and cajoling help in kind where needed. Metal stands for models were made and donated by an engineering company: perspex covers to go over the models came from the workshops of a major theatre: a vital grant was offered by the British Council, and many other



*The triumphant British team with their trophy at the Waldstein Palace ceremony in Prague 1979.*

place it became more and more strange to colleagues in other lands that the country which claimed to lead the world in theatre was nevertheless so reticent about putting itself on the line. Were we being snobs, or Little Englanders? Or had we perhaps lost courage in our claims of supremacy? It was also becoming clear that the PQ's were offering a unique opportunity for designers and indeed other theatre workers from the world over to come together to discuss and compare, in the presence of one another's achievements, their methods, systems, problems, customs, attitudes. The value of these occasions was heightened by coin-

companies, organisations and individuals contributed.

The enthusiasm of the British entrants for their adventure started to send out irresistible vibrations. Why should Britain not also be seen at the student section of PQ 75, or the architectural? At London's Central School of Art & Design, Theatre Design Department Head, John Gunter, picked up the vibrations and responded by gaining permission and funds for tutor Peter Avery and the second year students to go to Prague. At Theatre Projects, Iain Mackintosh organised an architectural entry.

Thus it was that Britain arrived at PQ75

– in January '76. Instead of warm spring weather, it was a bitterly cold Prague winter. Czechoslovakia had spent 1975 celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of their liberation from the Nazis, and over-pressured time had squeezed the Quadrennial from its springtime slot. Accordingly, the Ministry of Culture with Orwellian ease had simply rewritten the calendar so that, for the world's designers at least, 1975 continued into January, and PQ75 took place in month thirteen.

As the British team, and the many supporters who had flown to Prague with them, set about installing their exhibition in the small wedge-shaped corner allocated by the PQ organisers in the Brussels Pavilion, Julius Fucik Park of Culture, it was hard to know what to expect. The main intention in coming had been to show the flag, and that was being achieved. But what would result? Would the financially enforced simplicity of the British exhibition tell for or against? Certainly some countries had spent fortunes on designing their exhibitions – East Germany (acres of pine and fitted carpets) and the USA particularly come to mind. Then there was the startlingly exciting work of some of the Soviet and Japanese designers for instance. How would Britain's small offering be compared to these? That British participation was welcome there could be no doubt, if only due to the gentle chiding as to a child who's stayed out too long: "at last you're here. Where have you been?" But would the tardy guest please or disappoint?

Two days later the answer was given, clear and unequivocal: while the Soviet Union gained the top prize, the Golden Troika, the British entrants were jointly awarded the Gold Medal for set design. The popularity of this verdict amongst the delegates from other countries could not be doubted. The elation and pride felt by the British contingent was unmatched. That they had come was good; that they had been welcomed was better; that they had been chosen was best.

The British success at PQ75, far from being an end, was only a beginning. Immediately, harnessing the enthusiasm the PQ award had fuelled, it was decided that a proper designers' organisation must be set up. The success in Prague had brought with it a duty to the international theatre community, a duty which that community clearly expected to be fulfilled. British theatre design had come into the market place, and substantiated the claims to be a world leader. It must now be prepared to contribute fully and efficiently to international exchange of views and information. It must make available its knowledge and expertise and examine that of others. Without a strong and representative organisation this could not happen. Further, the respect shown to Britain in Prague had naturally given a boost to British designers' self respect. A proper organisation could harness that self respect and pride to work for long overdue improvements in the conditions of employment of designers in Britain.

Thus was born the Society of British