

# Theater – Spiegel der Welt

FRANCIS REID reflects upon an exhibition of images from  
Cologne Theatre Museum

Cologne's Theatre Museum at Schloss Wahn includes neither a permanent public display nor a temporary exhibition area. It is a study collection for the University's Institute of Theatre, Film and Television Studies. However the staff are prepared to answer specific queries and provide research access to the 100,000 volume library, the programme archives, and collections of scenic designs, critical reviews, photographs and printed items.

The museum mounts occasional exhibitions in host galleries and the discovery that **Theater – Spiegel der Welt** was designed by Josef Svoboda gave me more than enough reason to plan to do my Christmas shopping in Cologne. Choosing a day, of course, when there was a performance of 'Hansel and Gretel' in the opera house.

Although the mirror metaphor for theatre has often been ill-used to the threshold of cliché and beyond, it provides a stimulating framework for an exhibition. The theatre and the world that it mirrors were in this case predominantly Germanic. But to have sought wider geographical reflections might have diffused the focus of what succeeded as a tightly selective display.

Theatre – Spiegel der Welt did not depend for its vitality upon particularly stunning quality in its individual exhibits. Displayed items were chosen for their value in illustrating thematic ideas, occasionally making their points in isolation but more usually by juxtaposition. The mirror metaphor provides opportunity for philosophic conjecture of every shade of complexity and this doubtless influenced the selection of exhibited material. Moreover such a metaphor provided abundant stimuli for any visitors seeking the sort of debate that attempts to rationalise visual images by converting them into words.

My own response was to an almost purely visual impact, heightened by the alternative views provided by viewing both direct and through a looking glass. This provided not just two but a whole series of alternative views since not only were there occasions for multiple reflections, but the mirror stimulated me to look also at the original from alternative angles. And that mirror metaphor must have been working away subconsciously because, afterwards, I realised that I had been more than usually relating theatre to social history during my walk through the exhibition. . . .

Ascending the Kunsthalle stairs, the visitor is confronted by a statement written backwards: turning towards the exhibition entrance, the words are corrected by a mirror. To offer a reflected image as reality is a theatrical device that immediately points the exhibition theme. Life size commedia

dell'arte figures point the way in.

The **Goldspiegel** room, celebrating the golden aspects of the eighteenth century as reflected in its theatre, has as its centrepiece Charles-Nicolas Cochin's etching of Voltaire's and Rameau's 'La Princesse de Navarre' performed in 1745 for the wedding of Maria Therese at Versailles. A simple viewing of the etching can be heightened by experiencing the spatial experiment of sitting on an eighteenth century chair to view the reflection of a blown-up copy. This induces a confusion of the eighteenth century them with the twentieth century us, amidst a further confusion of reality resulting from some of the printed chandeliers, balustrading and proscenium-like framing being repeated between image and mirror.

Supporting this central experience, set in an appropriate ambience of elegant chairs and candle sconces, are paintings and prints. Watteau's Italian actors. A gouache copy of the great Panini theatre interior that hangs in the Louvre. Books of Bibiena engravings from 1795. And originals of many prints that we know from history books.

Other aspects of the eighteenth century, particularly those associated with civic rather than court dramatic entertainment, are viewed through plane and concave mirrors. The **Planspiegel** illustrates Lessing's 'Minna von Barnhelm' by reflecting upon the simplicity associated with Brecht's 'Eine Wand und ein Stuhl sind schon sehr viel'; while a small **Hohlspiegel's** concave surface allows it to contain a life size setting of the furniture and props realised from Chodowiecki's 1785 engraving of a scene from Schiller's 'Kabale und Liebe'.

So often have I ogled, in reproduction, the manager backstage among wing lights that I come over all dizzy on encountering not just the original but a companion with a chandelier reference unknown to me. To the barely decipherable squiggles on my notebook, I add details of the source in the nearest I will ever get to a fair round hand.

The late nineteenth – an age whose theatre extended into the beginnings of the twentieth – reflected alternative versions of life: the beautiful and the clouded. In the **Schönspiegel** we experience an era when, says the catalogue, 'The dream of every theatre director was a stage from a mail order catalogue'. In the exhibition catalogue there is a description of a 1900 visit to a Berlin firm specialising in stage decor of the extremely decadent splendour that I personally rather hanker after a return to.

A 1900 salon design has been partly realised and if the realisation is a little plodding when compared with the

heightened ethereal romanticism of the design drawing, then that is probably characteristic of the reality of stage canvas. However when viewed through its mirror, the scene softens with the ambience that distance and a softer stage lighting would have given.

(Oh that we could know the experience of earlier designs realised by the painters and carpenters of their own eras, and viewed in the ambience of the architecture and lighting of their theatres! But could we absorb enough social history to be able to see what the original audiences **thought** they saw?).

From the stylised artifice of cloth, border and profiled wing, placed and painted in beguiling perspective, to the inevitable reaction against this beautifying mirror: The exit from the brightly clear salon decor leads without hesitation into the gloom of Gorki reality. Here all is 'naturalismus' revealed by 'atmosphärische lichtmalerei'. Motivated directional light revealing the cellar's three-dimensional form is offered as an example of the clouded reflection of the **Blindspiegel**. Yet the environmental reality of the set (one initially enters into it rather than looks upon it) makes this seem like a clear reflection of dramatic truth. The mirror can be a very mixed metaphor!

With the distorted reflections of the **Zerrspiegel** we are firmly into the twentieth century. Hasenclever and the expressionism that most of us (well I certainly do) particularly identify as synonymous with German dramatic theatre in the formative years of our own century.

The **Facettenspiegel** is given a particularly dramatic treatment in the exhibition. A large underlit glass platform carrying an extensive collage of Berlin images of the period when a Zeppelin over the Brandenburg Gate was a commonplace is reflected in a huge multifaceted mirrored dome. The platform is walkable upon and this increases the experience of the reflections and influences their nature. The mixture of decadence and the staging reactions it provoked made the Berlin theatre of the twenties and early thirties an excitingly innovative place. Is it just my age that makes me feel that the decadence of yesteryear was more inventive than the decadence of today? Or have the technological developments in the performing media isolated popular culture into something that still provokes critics when they choose to make contact, but no longer stimulates creative artists?

The cabaret costume designs are of the quality that endears me to decadence whether in actuality or in satirical comment upon it. The display of Max Brand's opera 'Machinist Hopkins' exemplifies the power of juxtaposed items combining to stimulate our understanding of a staging – design