British Theatre Design — The Modern Age


It has taken nearly three years to compile this volume, the first-ever exhaustive overview of British theatre design. And British Theatre Design turns out to be a thorough and unique reference work looking at the work of almost all those set designers whose work is seen in professional theatres around the British Isles. John Goodwin has compiled an excellent collection of essays to accompany what is essentially Britain’s stage design portfolio.

Enormous care has been taken in the layout and quality of the book’s presentation, but its main strength lies in the excellent colour and black and white photographs which show settings rather than close-ups of the action.

One hundred and thirty designers are included in the book which is broken into eight sections, beginning with essays by commentators such as Sir Roy Strong and Trevor Nunn, each of which refers to many of the productions illustrated later in that section. Sir Roy Strong sets the scene with a short discussion of the post-War years of British theatre design, with critic Michael Ratcliffe continuing on plays. Here, amongst other great productions of the 80s, we are treated to Alison Chitty’s stunning design for Martine at the National Theatre, John Napier’s clever setting for Nicholas Nickleby and Bill Dudley’s colourful designs for Futurists and Bartholomew Fair at the National. Perhaps the most beautiful picture in the book is Anthony Ward’s own photograph of his design for The Tempest at The Swan Theatre, Worcester which shows the quality of choice and presentation that can be achieved in a volume prepared with care.

John Higgins, opera critic, provides the essay for the next section, which looks at the lavish designs that have been enjoyed by British opera. Tim O’Brien, who contributes the final essay of the book, and Tazeen Firth provide solid designs which are representative of the scale and detail of scenography for British opera productions with designs for Taranovat, A Midsummer Night’s Dream and the celebrated Peter Grimes at the Royal Opera House, but Maria Björnson’s enormous contribution to theatre design shines forth in pictures of From the House of the Dead — stunningly lit by Chris Ellis — and The Valkyrie. Stephanos Lazaridis’ work is also very impressive in this section.

Trevor Nunn, the father of “the designer musical,” rigorously defends the importance of design in the British Musical Theatre. Here John Napier has cornered much of the market, with Cats, Les Miserables, Time and Starlight Express providing colourful spreads along with fascinating costume sketches.

Design for Dance shows a lot more work by British lighting designers, although only secondary credits are included here with much more emphasis on backcloths and costumes. John B. Read’s lighting is always refreshing and stimulating to observe, but Peter Mumford’s work is also well depicted here. Interestingly the chapter on dance moves away from many of the conventional theatre spaces that are represented in the preceding chapters, but designer Pamela Howard’s essay deals specifically with “found spaces.”

John Goodwin’s enormous achievement in producing an accurate cross-section of theatre design in the 80s is astonishing and the book provides an excellent reference book for designers and non-designers alike. Whilst the essays may be said to provide a frame for the pictures, it is in the latter that the book’s value lies since the quality and substance of the material is far in excess of previous surveys of the subject.

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