

BOOKSHELF

British Theatre Design — The Modern Age

Edited by John Goodwin. Foreword by Sir Peter Hall. Weisdendfeld and Nicholson, London 1989.

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 Tazeena Firth provide solid designs which are representative of the scale and detail of scenography for British opera productions with designs for *Turandot*, *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 Misérables*, *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.

DAVID I. TAYLOR

British Theatre Design — The Modern Age, edited by John Goodwin, is a lavishly illustrated collection of the work of 130 British designers, illuminated by informative commentary. (below, the design of Paul Brown for the 1987 tour of *Falstaff*. "[Director] Graham Vick wanted a *Falstaff* of Benny Hill proportions," he says in his commentary. "Costumes proclaimed the vanities and vulgarities of the bourgeoisie.")

