

DIRECTOR/DESIGNER PHILIP PROWSE HAS TURNED THE CITIZENS INTO A WORLD-CLASS REPERTORY

# An Ingenious Citizen

BY CORDELIA OLIVER

Since 1970 when he became co-director of the Citizens' Theatre, Philip Prowse has been creating innovative design for their home — a 641-seat proscenium playhouse built in 1878. He has overcome the problems posed by the theatre's steeply raked stage and the 19th-century stage machinery still intact below. More of a challenge is the theatre's limiting budget which often obliges Prowse to revise the same set for different productions, such as repainting his black set for *The Vortex*, and using it white for *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (left).

*Depuis qu'il a été nommé Directeur Associé du Citizens' Theatre en 1970, Philip Prowse a créé des décors innovateurs pour son théâtre — un espace à proscenium de 641 places construit en 1878. Il a surmonté les problèmes que posent la scène en pente raide et la machinerie du XIX<sup>ème</sup> encore intacte. Un plus grand défi est le budget modeste qui souvent force Prowse à revoir le même décor pour plusieurs spectacles, comme par exemple, le décor noir de la pièce The Vortex, qui a été repeint en blanc pour 'Tis Pity She's a Whore (à gauche).*

Philip Prowse hat seit 1970, dem Jahr in dem er Co-Regisseur am Citizens' Theatre wurde, originelle Designs für sein Zuhause — ein Schauspielhaus mit 641 Sitzen aus dem Jahre 1878 — geschaffen. Er überwand die Probleme, die steile Bühne und die sich darunter befindende, intakte Bühnenapparatur aus dem 19. Jahrhundert stellen. Eine noch grössere Herausforderung sind die beschränkten Finanzen des Theaters, die Prowse oft zwingen, dasselbe Bühnenbild für eine andere Vorstellung zu revidieren, wie zum Beispiel sein schwarzes Bühnenbild für *The Vortex* und es weiss für *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (links) zu gebrauchen.

JOHN VERE BROWN

Philip Prowse came to Glasgow's Citizens' Theatre in the autumn of 1969 as chief designer in a team headed by the new artistic director, Giles Havergal. Even then, his ability to create theatrical illusion of a very special kind soon began to attract attention even beyond Scotland. He would set a given play in such a way that, unless you were unable to respond to visual stimuli, it would have the effect of intensifying — indeed, at times, even adding a pertinent comment on — the meaning of the work in question. Prowse is, above all, a visually creative artist, using metaphoric means to express his own response. It wasn't really surprising that, before long, he began to direct and design his own productions.

The Citizens' Theatre is a traditional playhouse with a late 19th-century auditorium in which the proscenium arch is flanked by ornate boxes embellished with statuary — not, you might suppose, the best possible matrix to contain the work of a theatre company given to unconventional productions. But, characteristically, Philip Prowse has managed to overcome, and indeed to make use of on occasion, the problems posed by a proscenium stage with (until very recently) no counterweight flying system and a steep rake. The stage also dips on either side, making the use of trucks difficult if not entirely impossible. It is a stage, moreover, which cannot be permanently altered since the original 19th-century machinery — traps, the tilting mechanism for shipboard scenes, and so on — still exists down below.

Ingenuity, then, is of the essence. What Prowse does, in his own words, is "try to

bend the space to suit the demands of the play." Sometimes a temporary thrust will be pushed out into the stalls, or a new acting floor will be constructed well above the original stage level to allow for entrances from and exits to the lower level. That happened to good effect a few years ago in his staging of *Mary Stuart* by Schiller, when Queen Elizabeth's strident voice was heard, as from a great echoing hall, some moments before the hieratic figure in its golden gown slowly appeared into the sombre room where most of the action took place.

There have been occasions when the proscenium arch itself has been emphasized, even outlined in electric light bulbs as in the Christmas pantomime seasons when

the crimson velvet curtain is also briefly restored. Or again, matt black paint applied to the whole of the proscenium, boxes and all, will have the effect of opening up the whole stage, especially when a forestage is added. There was also a period, in 1982, when for the three "revolutionary" plays of Jean Genet, *The Balcony*, *The Blacks*, and *The Screens*, Prowse not only emphasised the presence of the proscenium boxes with scarlet, black, and gold paintwork, but also lent ambiguity to the scene by having them

