

What is Design?



Ann Hould-Ward

The following is the text of the keynote address presented by Ms. Hould-Ward for the 1990 USITT Costume Symposium held in New York City during August 1990. She has graciously agreed to share it with the membership.

—Joy Emery, Associate Editor



Teachers, students and professionals alike respond with excitement and interest when one begins to explore ideas concerning what "design" is.

When Holly Cole, Claudia Stephens and I sat contemplating the topic for this discussion, Holly mentioned preparing the designer for the work situation through projects based on historical costume research. I said that I personally feel a great deal more should be done with the individual imagination at the level of training designers.

Very often directors I work with wish to pursue a vastly different landscape of the play or dance piece than is normally envisioned. This very fact in my own work has made me realize how essential it is that we begin to reinforce the importance of the elements each creator brings to his or her work. By this I mean that we examine what and who each designer is as an artist. This process is begun for us through a personal journey back into what we each came from and how that—along with where we've lived and what we've experienced—leads to our own interpretations of plays, operas, dances and performance pieces.

As I was beginning to work on this discussion topic, I ran across Arthur Bartow's book *The Director's Voice*. I would like to share with you two comments from this marvelous book by directors that I think truly speak about the artist's response to the work: relating it to who you are and what you came from.

First, in his interview with John Hirsch, Bartow began by laying out the facts of Hirsch's devastating childhood:

He is an authority on survival—having walked out of the ashes of the Budapest ghetto at the end of the Holocaust at age fifteen, to wander alone through Europe going from consulate to consulate until a country could be found that would grant him refuge. He and his grandfather had been sent from the village of his birth to seek anonymity in Budapest when the Nazis invaded Hungary. His mother had made the decision that it would be those two who might survive—the grandfather to preserve the knowledge of the past and the young John who represented the future. The family maid provided the conduit into the ghetto that saved him from the Nazis. His parents and eight-year-old brother were taken to Auschwitz, where they perished.²

Let us keep this in mind as we go on to listen to how Hirsch replied to Bartow's questions:

Were there memorable influences?

As a child, I was surrounded by music, theatre, all the arts. When I was three years old, I remember, I danced for Nijinsky, accompanied on the piano by a lady called Mrs. Mozart, a friend of our family. This quiet, bald man came into our house and I danced for him to the tune of "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" Touring players used to come and perform next door in the ballroom of a hotel and there I saw my first play, *John Hero*. I remember a backdrop on which the moon and stars and the sun all happily coexisted, painted on the same cloth. I thought that was magical.

My grandfather, in whose room I slept, told me a story every night before I went to sleep for four years. His stories of outlaws and fairy queens have had a lasting effect on my work. This may account for my

attachment to the late comedies and romances of Shakespeare.

My maternal grandmother, who lived in Budapest, often took me to the Luna Park, where there was a marionette theatre and to the theatre by Lilliputians, the little people. I was in love and astonished by all I saw. At home, I made my own puppet theatre.

Another very strong influence was the Catholic Church. You know, being Jewish in a small town, excluded from the religion of the majority, which was so mysterious and theatrical to me, served as a great stimulus for my imagination. Most of the ritualistic elements of my productions of Shakespeare's works are really my way of being a Catholic.

There is one more thing. During the war years, I was a young student in Budapest when leftists and Jewish artists were exiled from theatres. So they performed in union halls, parks, wherever they found a place. These were the only places where the truth could be spoken. Sometimes these performances took place with the police surrounding the hall taking pictures of people who went in. Many of the performers were dragged away because they were performing censored and forbidden material. From very early on, I realized that theatre deals with truth.

Your productions of both Lear and As You Like It were described as extremely "dark."

Yes, well, *Lear* is a bone-bleak play. It's the most pessimistic play I know. It's about a wasted life. And that waste produced devastation for the country that Lear ruled. In many ways, you're dealing with Stalin when you're dealing with Lear. I bet Lear, like Stalin, killed his wife. I always thought of Stalin's daughter when I was thinking of

Cordelia.

The same darkness that lives in Lear is in the comedies, too. In the nineteenth century, *As You Like It* might have been filled with rabbits and cuckoos and Beerbohm trees. That's how they saw the play. But I live in a different time.

When I did *As You Like It*, the court was a phantasmagorical, E. T. A. Hoffmann, black, rococo court—the court of a tyrant. A German who went through the last world war upbraided me for putting Nazis on the stage in the court. There were no Nazis on the stage, there were no swastikas. But the fact of the matter is that he saw Nazis behind it and that's exactly what I was doing. I work out of my guts and I work out of my own past and I see what I see. That's why I love to do these plays.

Another of the great playwrights encountered in your search has been Chekhov. His works frequently are elusive to directors.

These endless discussions about Chekhov. Is it a comedy or isn't it a comedy? Every time I do Chekhov I think about my mother, who had an incredible sense of humor. She was able to laugh in the middle of funerals. She would squeeze my hand white but she couldn't help laughing.

Is that the secret of Chekhov? The contrast of the tragedy next to the absurdity of life?

Exactly. My mother threw out a postcard from the cattle car that was taking her to Auschwitz. And, by some miracle, I got it. The postcard was in Hungarian but there was a line in French—a joke. Just a single line. So I understand Chekhov.

Today, how can a director have an interior understanding of that world inhabited by Chekhov?

Anybody who has undergone change and loss ought to be able to do those plays. Look, our society is constantly changing, dissolving in front of our very eyes, so we should be able to understand Chekhov's worldview.¹

Though not as dramatically, Garland Wright has also expressed his own responses, in terms of his roots, to Bartow when speaking about his production of *K* based on Kafka's *The Trial*:

With the Lion Company you did your exploration of Kafka, but it seems that you had really been thinking about that piece for a very long time prior to that.

Ah, Kafka and me. I've traced my interest back to when I was a junior in college. Dr. Bernard Hobgood, my teacher at SMU, gave me a copy of *The Trial*. He said, "I think you'll like this." I read it, totally illiterate about Kafka and was astonished. You know, every once in a while, one has an epiphany where someone else is thinking your thoughts or vice versa. I had a deep response to the book. *The Trial* became a sort of obsession and was always in my head. It was about eight years later that one day I said at a Lion company meeting, just whimsically, "Listen, if twelve of you can sign up and have time to work, let's do it."

And in a way, my interest in Kafka also has to do with Texas. I suppose because of where I grew up, I'm fascinated by the surrealists. I tend to see that way. And Kafka, to me, captures the interior puzzlement, paranoia and absurdity of the terrain one can perhaps see inside one's own head but can't verbalize or doesn't want to admit.

I grew up in Midland, a desert town that you could see for a hundred miles before you got to it. There were few trees, little grass. It was totally fabricated by some companies who discovered a lot of oil there and built a little town for all of their executives. And it seemed totally wrong for its terrain. Because it couldn't be green, people painted their grass. And in the middle of this desert would be a forty-story building of marble; and a house that had a painted-green caliche gravel lawn along with a 1957 Chevy parked in front. This was reality to me. So Kafka's world wasn't bizarre to me—it was like my world. There's a great line in a Len Jenkin play where one of the characters says something like: "The trouble with this is, it's actually my life." A lot of people from Texas talk about the barrenness of the terrain, the lack of intellectual stimulation or whatever—which tends to make one retreat to the imagination. Yes, I think Texas prepared me well to embrace Kafka,

even though most people assume his is a more urban kind of writing.⁴

Now, clearly I don't think that even, play need be examined in minute detail based on our own psyche. Rather, we should suggest to our students—and allow ourselves the opportunity—to open up to what is actually inside us as artistic collaborators in developing a visual statement.

I think I have been greatly affected by the solitary power of the prairie landscape. I grew up with combined with the tremendous scope of the mountains—the deep thrill I remember their majesty always brought to my breast. I believe I am always interested in the power and strength of a design because of this response to my physical terrain as a child.

I think my complex and sometime perplexing color sense is also related to this—from the extremely detailed and colorful designs of Native America elements which were associated with excitement and celebration in my world to the wide expanses of golden wheat fields drying in the fall to silvery white to the way a man's skin ages from years in the fields and how it is contrasted to the soft skin of the young child he holds his arms at night—from the majesty of my grandfather sitting center of the Supreme Court in the court chambers Helena, Montana to the vibrant pink and orange sunset behind the grain elevator of my small hometown set off by a heavy with the grain dust of another harvest.

I ask you to look into yourself to find these centers to widen and elaborate your own work. Examine your design work so that by striving for emotional meaning for ourselves and our work begin to give it a stronger visual meaning for others.

Ann Hould-Ward is well known for Broadway designs for Into the Woods. Sunday in the Park with George, designed with Patricia Zipprodt. Her costume designs have been seen in many regional theatres, including the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis.

Endnotes

1. Arthur Bartow, *The Director's Voice* (New York: Communications Group, Inc., 1988). Used with permission.
2. Bartow 158.
3. Bartow 162.
4. Bartow 330.