Czech designer brings action to Orpheus.

Renowned Czech scenographer and visiting artist Jaroslav Malina brought his unique vision, humor and sense of “action design” to OSU and our production of Orpheus Descending this past fall quarter. His residency was part of an ongoing exchange agreement between the OSU Department of Theatre and the Performing Arts Akademie (AMU) in Prague, Czech Republic. This exchange has been made possible, in large part, by the continued efforts of Joe Brandesky (OSU-Lima), the generous support of the OSU College of the Arts and the Ohio Arts Council (OAC).

Many events highlighted Jaroslav’s stay with us. Most notable were: his scenic design for Orpheus; his challenging graduate course in Czech Design; his fascinating lectures and presentations interpreting “Metaphor and Irony: Czech Scenic and Costume Design, 1920-1999” at the OAC’s Riffe Gallery (an exhibition organized by the Ohio Arts Council and the Theatre Institute, Prague in partnership with OSU Theatre, Columbus and Lima Campuses); and numerous dinners, openings, parties and informal gatherings where Jaroslav shared his insights on life, art and theatrical design with liberal doses of his particular style of wit.

Orpheus Descending proved to be a monumental, concrete example of Czech “action design” made famous by theatre collaborators as a means of metaphorically communicating with audiences during the totalitarian rule of Czechoslovakia. The vertical, steel structure, conceived by Jaroslav and faculty director/collaborator Sue Ott Rowlands, both directly reflected Orpheus’s descent into hell and indirectly referenced the dangerous, stratified world of the play. The scenic environment drove the “action” of the piece in a variety of ways. Its non-realistic, brutal composition focused attention on the actor’s interaction with this hard, unyielding space. It created dangerous perches for beautiful, personal revelations that foreshadowed ominous consequences. Finally, much of the set collapsed during the burning/destruction of this treacherous world showing, in a very physical way, the collapse of Lady’s illusion.

Jaroslav’s graduate course in Czech Design forced our students to reexamine their more traditional, reality based approaches to theatrical presentation. Through a series of design projects and exercises, students were challenged to find metaphorical ways to express their design ideas for several plays in a broad range of media. Pushing these boundaries together proved to be a rewarding, eye-opening experience for all who participated.

As a featured artist in “Metaphor and Irony: Czech Scenic and Costume Design 1920-1999” at the OAC’s Riffe Gallery, Jaroslav was a direct link to the exhibited work. His insights into this work, rarely seen in the U.S., proved inspirational to Ohio theatre artists, teachers, students and art patrons alike. Jaroslav further shared his insights on
Action Stage Design by presenting the annual Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute Lecture at the Wexner Center.

The Prague Exchange
In April 2001 Mary Tarantino continued the exchange between the Department of Theatre and the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (AMU) by offering a lighting workshop at AMU. The workshop began with securing a venue and installing the lighting equipment necessary to the lecture, demonstration, and student projects. Much of this work was capably arranged by Professors Petr Matásek and Tomas Zizka in advance of Mary’s arrival. The equipment included a combination of traditional fixtures as well as state-of-the-art contemporary moving light fixtures and control consoles, giving participants many options for experimentation. Lighting truss, seating platforms, black masking, and piles of electrical cable transformed a former kitchen into a modest theatre venue.

Lectures were given to participants, where Mary discussed her work as a lighting designer and a university professor. The lecture was accompanied by slide presentations, showing a range of Mary’s design projects for theatre, opera, musicals, dance, and architecture, in professional and educational venues. Mary discussed lighting design practices in America, with particular attention given to process, collaboration, and various types of lighting documentation regularly used by U.S. designers.

The projects that the students developed ranged from The Snow Queen by Hans Christian Anderson, to Anton Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya, to “Angle Study,” a delightful and evocative experimentation of 2 and 3-dimensional forms powerfully revealed through light. Mary was most impressed with the students’ ability to understand physical space and composition, as well as their exploration of the dynamic between light and shadow. Mary believes the workshop was a great accomplishment, and looks forward to future collaborations with the Academy of Performing Arts. Results of some of the project presentations can be found linked to the theatre lighting web site. Visit http://www.the.ohio-state.edu/ and follow the links!

Cuban Connection
The Department of Theatre has been collaborating with the Ohio Arts Council to develop relationships with theatre artists in Cuba. During June of 2000 Dan Gray and Mary Tarantino were the first OSU faculty to visit Cuba with a view to meeting and making connections. In the spring of 2001 the first Cubans, all of whom are associated with the Ludwig Foundation in Havana, visited Columbus. Fernando Saez, coordinator of the performing arts programs at the Ludwig Foundation, had a two week residency, during which time he visited classes, met students and faculty, attended our production of Wit, and experienced a broad range of theatre training and production. On May 10 Fernando gave a talk at the Wexner Center of the Arts, where he spoke passionately about the state of theatre production in Cuba. Following the talk OSU Theatre and the Hispanic Student Association co-sponsored a reception in honor of Fernando. Shorter visits were made by Wilfredo Benitez, associate director of the Ludwig Foundation, and Manolo Garrigo, lighting designer. Both Fernando and Wilfredo met with Dr. John Greisberger, head of International Education in the Office of International Studies. The department plans to develop a course for students on the arts in Cuba which would involve spending time in Havana.

Cuban theatre artist Fernando Saez speaks on “Contemporary Theatre in Cuba” at the Wexner Center. Fernando was in residence with the department during May as part of the Ohio Arts Council’s International Program residency exchange.

Wayne Lawson, Executive Director of the Ohio Arts Council, and Helena Albertova, co-curator, at the opening of the Metaphor and Irony exhibit.

Ohio Arts Council
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The Ohio Arts Council’s International Program is designed to foster long term involvement in international cultural exchange. The program encourages Ohio artists and arts organizations to form partnerships with arts professionals abroad. The International Program provides grants to assist nonprofit educational, cultural and arts organizations, as well as individual artists, performers, educators, arts managers and administrators, to develop exemplary international arts projects and innovative partnerships that increase Ohioans’ access to international arts activities. OSU Theatre is delighted and proud to be included in this important work by the ever innovative OAC.