

This year we celebrate the 100-year anniversary of Josef Svoboda's birth, one of the foremost scenographers involved in many innovative proposals for theatre stage sets, lighting and projections. His work has been celebrated in many theatres throughout the world. He was also one of the most prolific and sought-after European stage designers

by **Ivan Margolius**

Josef Svoboda (1920-2002) was born in Čáslav, some 50 miles east of Prague. His father was a cabinet-maker. In 1939 Josef was accepted to the faculty of philosophy at Charles University in Prague. Before that Svoboda spent time in his father's workshop learning carpentry and furniture making. At the same time he showed talent in painting and theatre stage design.

In 1939 the Third Reich occupied Czechoslovakia and Svoboda's university education was deferred. Instead he took a course in carpentry in Prague. This continued with another two-year study of interior design. After his studies, in 1942 he worked with a group of theatre amateurs in Čáslav producing scenery for their dramas supported by slide projections which was commented on in the press: 'Svoboda gave the play a poetic form.'

In 1943 with other theatre artists and writers he established an ensemble called the New Group (Nová skupina) staging two

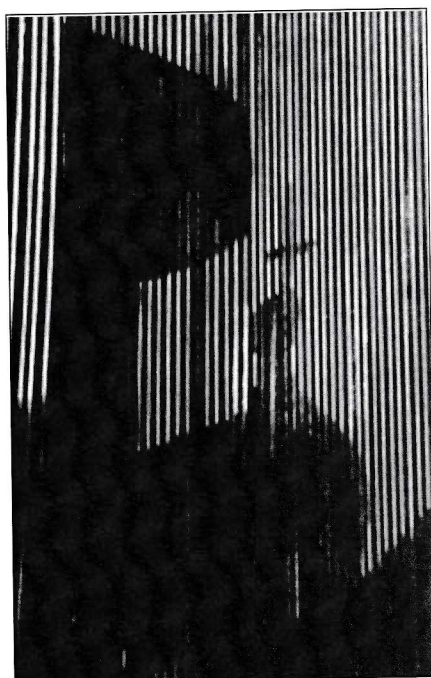
productions in the theatre hall of the Smetana Museum in Prague.

After the war Svoboda founded a new ensemble, the 'Grand Opera of the Theatre of the Fifth May' (Velká opera Divadla 5. května), [today's State Opera] becoming its chief designer and technical director, where he met directors Alfréd Radok (drama) and Václav Kašlík (opera).

This group later came under the control of the National Theatre. In June 1950 Svoboda completed his architecture degree at Prague's Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design. Svoboda though decided to pursue his career in theatre rather than architecture, as he wanted to achieve a greater artistic freedom working for the National Theatre during the hard



Svoboda



Top: Josef Svoboda in his office.
Above: Stretched cord scenery design for a Chekhov play at the National Theatre, London 1967

Stalinist socialist realist times of the 1950s.

After the 20th Soviet Communist Party Congress in 1956 additional opportunities developed and the restrictive Party guidelines became somewhat flexible allowing more artistic expression. This political change was reflected in Svoboda's involvement with the Czechoslovak Expo 58 display in Brussels.

The work led Svoboda to design scenery for productions abroad, in Venice, Amsterdam, Zagreb, Berlin, Rio de Janeiro, Vienna, Milan, Havana, Edinburgh, Wiesbaden, Stockholm, London, New York, Montreal and elsewhere. Josef Svoboda created theatre sets for more than 700 productions in Czechoslovakia and abroad.

In 1950 Svoboda designed a theatre set for F F Šamberk's *The Eleventh Commandment* production for the State Film Theatre in Prague which bore the first ideas later used in *Laterna magika* – the integration of a film show and living actor.

For Brussels, Josef Svoboda and Alfréd Radok, with Radok's brother Emil, designed two new entertainment shows to be seen at the Czechoslovak pavilion: *Laterna magika* and *Polyekran*. *Laterna magika* consisted of a complex integration of living performers with projected film and slide images aiming to achieve simultaneity in a synthesis and fusion of actors and projection. *Polyekran* employed a synchronous, multi-screen, multi-projection system of slides and film. Both shows were a

sensation and made the Czechoslovak pavilion one of the most visited exhibits at Expo 58. The more complex *Diapolyekran* projection followed at Expo 67 in Montreal, Canada.

During the second half of the 20th century; hardly any prominent director could be found worldwide with whom Svoboda did not collaborate. He worked successfully with Armand Delcampe, John Dexter, C H Drese, August Everding, G Friedrich, Giorgio Strehler, Laurence Olivier, Anthony Quayle and others.

In 1967 Svoboda designed stage scenery with stretched cords for the London National Theatre production of Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* directed by Laurence Olivier. Cords were strung tightly from floor to the fly tower, more often than not in several layers. Scenic objects and furniture were sparsely placed in front of the cords. Depending how they were lit, either from the front, rear or above, they formed an impression of a solid wall, delicate bars, or shimmering depths without precise limits.

Occasionally slide projections were used on the cords, for example suggesting building forms. The set was eminently successful and Olivier commented: 'It was exactly what I dreamed of.'

Svoboda's work was appreciated at home and abroad and he received many awards and titles.