

The Semiotics of Action Design

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[Figures](#)

Action Design, a scenographic methodology with its formative roots in the former Czechoslovakia, is, in fact, an approach to all aspects of theatre production. Its theory encompasses not only the creation and utilization of sets, costumes, and lighting, but also the entire realization of the performance text. A highly metaphorical approach, it eschews decoration for its own sake. The term Action Design designates an approach to scenography that is physically and psychologically functional, and intimately interactive with the actor. ¹ Its principles and manifestations, however, have been both embraced and misunderstood. Some dismiss it as an impractical approach to theatre whose only validity lay in its now obsolete strategy of obfuscation in the face of Communist party censors--a fine vehicle in a closed society, but too obscure for practical use in a free world. On the contrary, we will argue that Action Design is a contemporary practice for forward-thinking artists, a practice that has moved beyond its structuralist roots and previous political contexts. Any consideration of Action Design must come to terms with it as a current, ongoing method of creating theatrical performances. Although rooted in the theatrical history of the Czech people, it is contemporary and relevant to theatrical artists throughout the world. ²

The Principles of Action Design

Action Design is an approach to scenography based upon four main principles. The first is function: everything placed onstage must be either physically or psychologically functional and vital. Mere decoration or interior design tends to dull and obscure direct and effective theatrical communication. Fanciful flights of abstraction, however, can have an equally deadening effect. Abstraction, if not well connected to the dramatic action and the actor's physical and psychological movement through the dramatic action, is, after all, only another form of decoration.

A second principle of Action Design is its emphasis on collaboration. The scenic environment must be created after a rigorous examination of the text in close collaboration with the director. The focus on collaboration leads to a common misunderstanding about Action Design: that it happens magically, and **[End Page 121]** only if the designer and director have known each other for a long time or they are somehow psychically joined at the hip. An effective collaboration in the United States between Jaroslav Malina and Ronald Willis has been fully documented in the article, "Jaroslav Malina Designs

Antigone," published in *Theatre Design & Technology* in 1988. Willis and Malina had known each other less than a month at the time of the collaboration. Other successful collaborations with Malina have occurred in Ohio with Joseph Brandesky and in California with M. Ursyas. The subject of the collaboration must be the moment-to-moment action of the dramatic text; for Action Designers, textual examination is key. The object of the collaboration is not to arrive at vague, general interpretations, but rather to allow each moment to speak specifically. The thorough nature of this examination and its aspirations are hinted at by Vladimír Jindra in his explication of the philosophical aspects of Frantisek Tröster's scenography. He calls it an "analytical destruction," undertaken in order to

create a new reality which would reflect the creator's opinions, a reality which would be a topical interpretation of the subconscious of a generation and an expression of an epoch. (qtd. in Jindra 67) ³

A third principle of Action Design is its pursuit of a complex, ever-shifting metaphorical structure. Jaroslav Malina, in particular, attempts to create what he calls a "big synthesis," the collective action of all the languages of theatre to explicate a play's many-faceted *metaphorical systems*. To Malina, such systems are not predetermined or prepackaged, but are dynamic, open, and fluid. Not only does "synthesis" imply an open-ended process rather than an outcome, synthesis implies the thesis and antithesis that lurk within it. Here we are concerned with the offspring of contradictory entities. The synthesis (the perceived "meaning" of a form or image) is but another "plus" or "minus" that will "morph" into some other "plus" or "minus" along the winding road of theatrical performance. This "big synthesis" is sometimes called "dynamism," or the transformability of the sign. Signifiers are interchangeable. Malina uses the term "broken metaphor" to denote the deliberate substitution of images for one another and, more importantly, the substitution of contradictory meanings associated with a single image. An object may become firmly established as a table, for example, only to be later used as a doorway. The object is neither, and both, and something else besides. As in Brechtian theory, that which is familiar is continually made strange--or, perhaps more precisely, made new through the act of contradiction. This ongoing contradiction enriches the performance text by increasing its expressive density. The expanding universe that results continually doubles back on itself to allow the audience a look from another perspective.

A fourth principle of Action Design is an intense irony, manifesting itself in the realization that, no matter how many meanings might be attached to the [End Page 122] setting as it interacts with the text, director, and actors, the objects onstage never deny their reality--as both concrete objects and purposefully theatrical materials used in the fictive construction. Coupled with a personal and complex metaphoric structure, Action Design frankly admits actuality. It is through such irony that this theatre approaches "reality," for irony not only enables a vital self-reflexivity for both artists and audience, but allows us to see ourselves with humility and humor.

The works of Jaroslav Malina and of Jozef Ciller perhaps best exemplify the principles that animate Action Design. These two artists present a cross section of a now split national identity: Jozef Ciller, mostly associated with the Slovak theatre, and Jaroslav Malina, one of the Czech Republic's chief scenographers. As contemporary Action Designers they also represent a split with Action Design's structuralist past. For both of these designers, the theatre is no longer a closed system of communication. They impart their personal visions with a kind of faith that, for each audience

member, there will also occur a personal vision. Neither artist would ever admit to having all the answers. The force of possibilities (the possibility of multiple and even contradictory interpretations) continues to renew Action Design, making it vital for practitioners all over the world. But the nature and usefulness of Action Design can perhaps best be presented by exploring the work of these two designers.

Jozef Ciller: Collaborative Design in Action

The development of Ciller's design philosophy took place during one of the times of heaviest Communist oppression in his country--the so-called "Period of Normalization" that followed the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies in 1968. As with many of his contemporaries in the theatre at this time, Ciller became committed to using art and theatre as active agents for social change. Accordingly, he imbues his design philosophy with an almost missionary zeal in the belief that art and theatre have social, moral, and ethical responsibilities in every instance. He admits that he was sometimes disappointed when social change was so slow and when his art did not seem to have much of an impact, but this fact just caused him to work harder. In an interview, Ciller remarks "It is impossible to eliminate stupidity because there are too many stupid people. But we cannot give up this fight. Because if we give up this fight we will be killed by this stupidity."⁴

Talking to Jozef Ciller and examining his work, one is immediately arrested by the passion and intensity of his designs and the penetrating and sophisticated intelligence that lies behind them. Ciller's emphasis on the actor as the basis for his design is, now, a completely thought out philosophical position. As he has noted, "An actor is the basic and most dynamic element of the scene. He is **[End Page 123]** able to separate the space, to change it according to need, and give it new meaning and, therefore, to create its fourth dimension" (Janíková and Martin 3). Ciller forges an active partnership between the actor and the stage. This leads him to an interest in the problem of creating an undivided theatre space that includes both the actor and the spectator. In defining this challenge, Ciller deals with one of the questions that concerned Czech theatre artists for decades. For example, Jindrich Honzl, both a noted director and an early semiotician, was equally concerned with the interjection of the actor into the design process (see note 1). In his essay, "The Sources of Action Design," Ladislav Lajcha notes that Honzl was acutely aware of the importance of the presence and action of the actor to any useful perception of the stage environment. The actor has a power to transform and give life to objects as ever-changing signs. As Lajcha quotes Honzl:

symbolic (representing) functions of the decoration and tools are signified only later by the actor's movement or by the way the actor used them, but not even then is the represented function synonymous with the object. (Honzl 249; qtd. in Lajcha 5)

Such an approach gives the actor plenty of scenographic weight. Like Honzl, Ciller remains aware that his designs place great "pressure," as he puts it, on the actors because of the minimal and highly metaphorical quality of the designs, so he works with the actors during the rehearsal to build up the performance. The actors see Ciller not simply as a stage designer, but as one of the company. In our interview with him, Ciller commented that the most exciting situation is to work with the directors and the actors in inventing the theme of the production, and then realizing it collaboratively. The "author's theatre," adopted during this time, was, and still is, a popular method of working among avant-garde groups in former Czechoslovakia. In this kind of theatre the director, actors, and designers

collaborate from the beginning to build a piece of theatre by themselves. Starting with an idea, a situation, or a story, the collaborators uncover the basic dramatic situations and create metaphorical theatrical equivalents over a considerable length of time. The designer works in close, daily collaboration with the actors and director during this process until all are satisfied with the result. The "script" comes last, and may be only a record of the collaborative process that has gone before.

The function of Ciller's art is not only to create the design but also to penetrate into the lives of human beings. This means that the theatre must use all the possibilities it can in order to achieve this spectator-stage connection. If theatre now uses only small possibilities, then expanding these possibilities is more than a matter of discovering or adapting new techniques. The question is rather *how* the creative team thinks in the theatre. Ciller concludes that one of the most important things in his theatrical world is his development of an artistic philosophy, based upon the actor in a theatrical space undivided from the audience. **[End Page 124]**

Ciller considers himself very fortunate in the circumstances that allowed him to develop his aesthetic. He was able to work in many different kinds of theatres--amateur, professional, avant-garde, national (official) theatres--with children, puppets, and for television and film. He has collaborated with some of the most gifted directors in his country in situations where the relationship was like an artistic partnership. All of these kinds of work have influenced him and have led to his present philosophy. While his interests do not lie with classical theatre and traditional production methods, Ciller thinks it possible to make the classical repertoire fresh if the collaboration is good. Finally, Ciller believes that a vibrant aesthetic comes from broad, expanding interests and an openness to new situations. His interests embrace all that we can call theatre design, up to and including performance art. He has a special fondness for exhibitions, happenings, and work with children because he feels that such work connects with wider audiences and holds more promise for influencing people and affecting social change.

Ciller and the Transformation of Signs



A review of Ciller's work shows how his practices implement his design philosophy. His design for Brecht's *Galileo* (see [fig. 1](#)), for which he won a gold medal in the 1983 Prague Quadrennial, shows how every element has a definite function. Produced at the SNP Theatre in Martin in 1979, this staging of *Galileo* stands as one of the most influential productions in the Action Design style. In collaboration with director I. Petrovicky, Ciller evolved a setting for *Galileo* **[End Page 125]** that is physically very simple but intellectually and philosophically quite complex.

The setting consists of an iron construction supporting a single, wide roll of brown paper above a simple wooden deck. The construction could be set up anywhere and reflects Ciller's concern for solving the realities of touring situations. The roll of paper served many functions during the performance. It first provided a visual parallel of the action, in that it contained all that was in the text, including Brecht's titles, which were projected from the back. The actor Galileo drew on the paper to illustrate his ideas and concepts, doors were cut into the paper when needed, Galileo's experiments were rear projected onto the paper, and, after it was used, the paper was torn off at the bottom and discarded to the side of the wooden deck. The roll of paper revealed its functions and multiple meanings as the production moved through time. Sometimes functioning as a background or

projection screen, it could serve simply as a static element in the scene. At other times, it became an active agent in the production, as when it was torn off, discarded, or set afire. To Ciller this meant that the printed record of any culture can be destroyed, but ideas can never be destroyed. A literal fire burned literal paper with great metaphorical resonance.

The roll of paper fit perfectly with Ciller's interest in exploring the extended meaning or metaphorical resonance of objects on the stage. The design also shows how Ciller was able to imbed in the design a critique of current social conditions in his country. The burning paper made a bold metaphorical statement in the Czechoslovakia of 1979. Artists challenged the oppressive censorship of the Communist government, Charter 77 had come into existence, and theatres around the country began to work in sophisticated and metaphoric ways to oppose the restrictive society. ⁵ The use of metaphors such as the roll of paper in *Galileo* was a favorite technique of the time. It captures well what Keir Elam calls the "transformability of the sign," or what Honzl called its "dynamism": a very simple object is transformed (and transforms the performance text) as the actors utilize and respond to it through constantly changing perspectives. In this case, Ciller uses a complex metaphor, not as an end in itself, but in order to comment on social matters. Dynamic transformations occur temporally, and the paper, in union with its metaphorical (sign-making) capabilities, never ceases to be other than what it literally is--paper.



In *The Princess With an Echo*, produced in Zilin in 1979, Ciller and director M. Tomásek used the same techniques of social critique in a production for children. They establish a system of signs that is fairly simple to read, but is all the more powerful through its very simplicity. For this play, a Romeo and Juliet-like story, Ciller set two grand pianos onstage with their lids raised (see [fig. 2](#)). He added small scenic elements to the lids of the pianos to indicate the two [End Page 126] kingdoms, and cut holes into the lids, allowing the actors to interact with the instruments, creating further changes of scene. A single pianist sat between the two pianos and played first one then the other as the scene changed from kingdom to kingdom. When the war occurred, the pianist played both pianos at the same time. The division between the two kingdoms was represented by a roll of toilet paper that started onstage, ran under the piano bench and continued out into the auditorium, dividing the audience of children in two. At the end of the war, the children in the audience destroyed the toilet tissue border as a sign of the reconciliation realized in the action onstage. In this design, Ciller transforms the objects onstage, thereby imparting more meaning to them than might be found in any realistic portrayal of kingdoms and borders. In his essay, "Semiotics in the Folk Theatre," Petr Bogatyrev describes this transformability of theatrical signs:

on the stage things that play the part of theatrical signs can in the course of the play acquire special features, qualities, and attributes that they do not have in real life. Things in the theater, just as the actor himself, are transformable. As an actor on stage may change into another person (a young person into an old one, a woman into a man, and so forth), so also anything, with which the actor performs, may acquire a new, hitherto [End Page 127] foreign, function. The famous shoes of Charlie Chaplin are changed by his acting into food, the laces becoming spaghetti (*Gold Rush*); in the same film two rolls dance like a pair of lovers. Such transformed things, used by the actor in his performance, are very common in folk theater. (35-36)

In a recent production of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, Ciller continued to pursue his long-

standing interests in social criticism and in breaking down the barrier between auditorium and stage. Produced in Bratislava at The Small Stage of the Slovak National Theatre in March of 1989 at the beginning of the "Velvet Revolution," the design and the production distilled the environment to a maximum of expressiveness using minimal means. The setting consisted of a simple architectural unit containing doors and windows at the back of the small stage. This unit, when combined with the changing of simple props--tables and chairs--constituted all of the scenery for the production. A most remarkable moment, however, happened in the third act town meeting. As the act began the house lights came up and the actors welcomed the audience as though they were fellow citizens of the town. When it came time for the vote to be taken, the audience was provided with long, narrow strips of paper that were blue at one end and white at the other. An actor asked the audience to vote on the question of Stockmann's guilt by returning only one half of the paper--white for guilty, blue for innocent. The actors then collected the slips, and it became obvious to the audience that the overwhelming majority of the slips were blue--innocent. Yet when the vote was officially announced, all the slips were white. This brilliant stroke of staging, the involvement of the audience, and the social critique imbedded in this action all made the production "site specific." As the country teetered on the brink of the overthrow of totalitarianism, struggling to establish a fledgling democracy, this was an electrifying moment of production. Although the production gained power by its historical exigency, its techniques provide a significant, general lesson: a rich, metaphorical moment achieved with such simple means can surely be seen as something more than a trick to fool the censors. The use of such simple signs to electrify the audience is the essence of live theatre.

Jaroslav Malina: Ironist of Theatrical Signs

An acknowledged founder and leader of the Action Design movement and perhaps its foremost spokesman in his country, Jaroslav Malina began to formulate his design ideas and theory during his work in Liberec. ⁶ From the beginning of his career, he was never interested in descriptive scenery that had no irony or metaphor behind it. Accordingly, he has never trusted the author's stage directions, preferring instead to develop his own personal approach to the dramatic material through close collaboration with his fellow artists. For Malina, as well as for other artists of his generation, both political [End Page 128] and artistic influences merge as one. Out of those influences and others, Malina created an artistic philosophy, a definition of the function of theatre, and a view of the collaborative process, which he articulates in the following manner. It is, he says,

a crazy adventure of spatial shapes, lights, colors and time--a chance for my personal improvisation. Sometimes even based on the script!!! But frankly, a serious theoretical analysis of the text and its explication in relation to our concept. Then, in practice, on the stage, free transformation of this concept into a poetical, metaphorical, non-verbal, theatrical world with frequent signals of irony and absurdity, without any judgment and with strong accents of improvisation. . . . Theatre is a very special reality and it cannot be real in the sense of "every-day reality." Theatre (and by inference all art) is not here to teach us nor to entertain us only. Perhaps it is here to remind us of our limits as well as our dreams. ⁷

The principle of contrast runs through all of Malina's thought. In his comments about his 1972 design for M. Gorky's *The Barbarians*, he explained that, more than just a personal quirk, his ideas are

actually a comprehensive view of theatre.

I start from the space I have to work in, and organize my own space into it . . . I like natural materials on the stage. If it were possible, I'd bring on water, mud, fire--but for a number of reasons this just can't be done, and so I work with more acceptable materials: things like real trees, dry leaves, sand. There's going to be a real person moving about on the stage, a real person made "theatrical" by his costume and make-up, and he's going to speak real words, elevated by the dramatist into unnatural configurations. And that's what I'm interested in on the stage: the relation between the natural--Nature--and the artificial. The tension that arises when they are combined--a piano among real trees painted white; a picket fence and drapes; a cut-glass chandelier and spotlights.

I don't go in for flats and other constructions that try to create the illusion that they're made of natural materials. I prefer some kind of metaphorical treatment, which leaves room for the play of the imagination. In *The Barbarians*, for example, I felt that the play demanded mud on the stage. But of course that was impossible, so instead I used a rather hideous carpet that didn't pretend to be representing mud, but was intended to evoke feelings associated with mud in the minds of the spectators.

Malina is frankly not interested in picture frame stages or realism, but works in proscenium theatres, using real materials in his designs. Through this essential "tension" or contrast, Malina articulates a kind of paradox. To put it another way, the manner in which the set pieces themselves interact with one another is often as striking as the interaction between such objects and the [End Page 129] actors. These elements of design do not subvert the role or power of the actor, but instead create a kind of "other" actor--another voice and a richer web of signs, all reacting with and against one another. Aesthetically and philosophically, Malina's designs all involve contrast, tension, improvisation, metaphor, and a functional connection to the action of the drama on the stage. Noted for his use of mobile, animated fabric in his designs, and for employing the simplest, low-tech solutions to physical staging and scene shifting, Malina makes these choices part of a deliberate philosophy. For example, here is Malina on the use of cloth:

Of all the materials available, I feel that cloth is the closest to man. After all, since time immemorial it has been the intermediary between the human body and the world. As well as that, though, it's pliant, but it can also be made stiff; it can be transparent, it can be opaque; it can flow in smooth folds or lie crumpled up, be beautiful or repellent. And of course it's relatively cheap, and easy to handle and store.



During a particularly rich period spent in Liberec, Malina began his long association with directors Karel Kríz and Ivan Rajmunt, director and dramaturge Jaroslav Kral, and dramaturge and playwright Vlasta Gallerová. These creative associations resulted over the years in productions such as *Brother Jacques*, *The Deer King*, *Love Letters*, *Leonce and Lena*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Blood Wedding*. For the 1973 production of *Brother Jacques*, Malina and Kríz collaborated on an environment composed of draped cloths that broke through the proscenium arch to include the audience under a kind of circus tent (see [fig. 3](#)). As with many other productions, Malina and Kríz sought to refine their ideas of "universal space" and "open

communication." By such terms, they mean an environment that is inclusive and functional, not closed and descriptive. In this view, theatrical space provides the requisites for the dramatic and physical action for the performer, while also addressing the audience on an aesthetic plane by evoking specific emotions. Both performer and audience member are simultaneously drawn into the same physical space.

When the space functions this way, Malina and Kríz believe, open communication between audience and production begins to occur. Aesthetically, open communication means an exchange between the stage and the audience that is theatrically honest and direct and does not place any philosophical or aesthetic barriers between the production and the audience. Socially, the idea rests upon a tacit agreement on the part of artists and audience that moral issues will be discussed as honestly and openly as the political situation will permit. The conventions of realism, which are all essentially based on the idea that the audience is not really in the theatre, tend to preclude this kind of actor-audience connection. The idea of open communication is further complicated by the association of realistic production with the hard-line cultural rules of **[End Page 130]** Socialist Realism in the 1950s and 1960s. These simple facts alone explain why the realistic style holds no interest for artists such as Malina. The metaphorical honesty, so vital to Action Design, cannot function in an approach that is as one-to-one in its sign association as realism.

Opening Communication: Malina's Scenography



For the 1973 production of C. Gozzi's *The Deer King*, Malina and Kríz sought a variation on their ideas of open communication by placing all the emphasis on the performers and their connection with the audience. ⁸ For this production, they deliberately made the background unimportant and instead emphasized Malina's costume designs (see [fig. 4](#)). The key elements were the actor, his costume, and above all his "mask." Quite openly, Malina aimed to reveal the contradiction that exists between the fixed, symbolic mask, which represents a character type, and the living, expressive face of the actor beneath it. To achieve this, he came up with the idea of larger-than-life "masks," consistently exaggerated and vividly colored, which did not cover the face but were worn by the actors above their heads or on their chests, like a kind of breastplate; they illustrated the characters of the persons they were playing. For example, the actress playing Smeraldina wore a huge breast-mask **[End Page 131]** throughout the whole play, and then at the moment she transformed into a virgin, she threw it off. The audience could easily see the straps and other devices used to attach these huge masks, and in fact the names of the characters could be seen written on the backs of them. The actors displayed them to the audience, indicating that they should be considered symbols of their characters, and treated them as though they were real parts of their own bodies (Isabella, for instance, drying the eyes of her mask when she wept). All of this was perfectly in accord with the "fairy tale" atmosphere of the play. In these costume designs, Malina skillfully handled the paradox of making the stage object both a vessel of signification and a phenomenon in and of itself. The irony that the mask is only a mask is transferred to other levels beyond the relationship between character and actor. Here, we realize that the signified reference is nothing more than it pretends to be--a mask, a sign for a character or an emotion. In general, Malina has made this dialectic between the phenomenon and its sign one of the cornerstones of Action Design. His continual breaking of the scenic illusion is a way for us to look at the moment, the character, and/or the action with a fresh perspective--an ironic perspective.

In 1980, Malina left the F. X. Saldy Theatre and moved permanently to Prague, where he continued his long collaboration with Karel Kríz and Vlasta Gallerová. In 1983, he began his freelance career while holding a part-time job at the D. P. Theatre in Gottwaldov. The period from 1983 to 1991 marks an extraordinarily rich time in Malina's career. Respected and much sought after as a collaborator, he designed an extraordinary number of productions--seventy-nine in total--in theatres in Prague and throughout the country. Notable among this vast amount of work are the productions of *Manon Lescaut*, *Cabal and Love*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *Don Juan*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Merlin*, *Miss Julie*, and *Insect Comedy*. [End Page 132]



The dramatic version of *Manon Lescaut* by V. Nezval, as designed by Malina in 1982, is a seminal production in the history and evolution of Action Design and captured a Golden Medal at the Seventh Triennial in Novi Sad, Yugoslavia, for him in 1984. An elegant example of Malina's famous use of mobile fabrics, it also demonstrates the interaction of design and dramatic action that he achieved with director Ivan Balad'a, and the skillful blending of simple theatrical materials as object and sign (see [fig. 5](#)). Malina comments on this production as follows:

First there was the need to play a melodramatic story in a manner acceptable for young contemporary audiences, to overcome sentimentality and create a dynamic story, full of changing environments. Anything but illustrations--rather the creation of a space which changes together with the inner flow of the play. Colors. An environment can be created by color, color has a rich associative content, colors can encounter each other, exist next to each other, even swallow each other. . . .

At the beginning of the performance young men build an ordinary pyramid made of gates (platforms) before the eyes of the audience. Over it hang seven teasers of intensive colors, one above the other, on ropes which are overtly controlled onstage. The first is of bright blue satin. As the story unfolds teasers of ever darker colors and more intensive shades drop down, through greens to purples, from bright red to dark brown--that is the color [End Page 133] of the stormy and murky sea which has washed up the dead Manon. At the beginning there was only a visual idea, which during rehearsals changed into a dramatic quality, since it was hidden in it, latently. ²

In response to his sense of the "inner flow" of *Manon Lescaut*, Malina used simple, explicitly nonillusionistic materials in the production in order to transform the single sign of the stage (or basic scenic idea of hanging cloth). The scenic environment is mutable and open, a sliding dialectic, at once suggestive of many locales, evocative of the play's inner life, and also, quite frankly and ironically, composed of large waves of beautiful neutrally-colored cloth.



In 1984, Malina and Kríz conceived what became a landmark production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the ABC Theatre in Prague. The design for the production illustrates, perhaps, the epitome of Kríz and Malina's ideas on universal space, open communication, and open metaphor. The setting was a complete abstraction, featuring two large pieces of white fabric stretched from various points hanging over the stage and extending out into the auditorium; a black surround with strands of hemp rope hung in front of it; and a thick foam rubber floor covered with two layers of white stretched fabric (see [fig. 6](#)). This floor conditioned

all the action, and the two layers of white fabric made possible the most enchanting feature of the performance. The fairies could get between the two layers of fabric offstage and then make their entrances by crawling between the two layers to conveniently located holes in the upper layer. Lighting was high intensity, colorless, and static. Costuming was fantastical, colorful, and exaggerated (Unruh, "Action Design" 12). In *A [End Page 134] Midsummer Night's Dream*, Malina uses the transformability of the sign (or, as he expresses it, the "openness of the metaphor") to suggest a number of interpretations. To the spectator, all of these directions are revealed and open to simultaneous exploration. The ambiguity and simultaneity of this production enhance Shakespeare without taking liberties that obscure whatever intentions we might imagine him to have had. Vlasta Gallerová writes of this production:

The important quality of Malina's set is the fact that it does not exist in itself; in the beginning it is only a specific kind of visual question mark. Only gradually do we discover the yielding nature of the floor--a square made of foam rubber, which leads to a specific type of walk and movement. At the same time this square defines the space in which the action takes place--a sort of ring for demonstrating the paradox of variable relations and strivings. This culminates towards the end, when Puck connects the baldachin or sky with the foam rubber earth . . . as if to say that such things can exist between heaven and earth. (77)

The 1987 production of *Love's Labour's Lost*, directed by Karel Kríz, marked a number of significant milestones in Malina's career. First and foremost, the production began Malina's work in the National Theatre in Prague. Because Malina had refused to join the Communist party, the National Theatre was closed to him during the years of strong repression in the "Period of Normalization" in the 1970s. However, the appointment of a more liberal administration in the National Theatre, the subsequent relaxation of cultural controls during the late 1980s, and Malina's own growing reputation as one of Czechoslovakia's foremost theatre artists made it possible for him, at last, to be invited to work there. The production also marked the beginning of a shift in the surface characteristics of Malina's style. Notably, the animated drapery that had become such a signature in his work up to this point was absent in this design. The reasons for this absence are quite complicated.

The principle of animated drapery had become a cliché in Czech stage design, and Malina felt he needed to find some new principles to distinguish his work. But beyond that, the design in *Love's Labour's Lost* represents the beginning of a period of introspection in his work. Malina feels that, with *Love's Labour's Lost*, his work is now becoming more personal, more interested in the "main artistic gesture" of his designs. Malina's designs are just as firmly based in metaphor as before, but are now becoming more colorful and more attractive and perhaps, as we have observed, less "functional." If they are less functional on a physical level, Malina more than makes up for it in intellectual depth and richness. Indeed, the designs beginning in 1987 show Malina's increased interest in a totally synthetic production style and the use of space as text--the stage design as a parallel visual text, simultaneous with the playwright's words.

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, Malina, Kríz, and dramaturge Jaroslav Kral synthesized a style out of their collaboration, opening up multiple levels of [End Page 135] communication and

perception. They began by editing the play to two hours in order to allow for a relaxed, almost indolent style of acting. In addition, they included seven of Shakespeare's sonnets at specific points in the script where they believed that the themes of the sonnets might expand the meaning of the action. The setting design contained many elements in different styles, as Malina's sketch (see [fig. 7](#)) indicates. At the top of the sketch is a representation of the ornate fire curtain in the National Theatre. The second band in the rendering is a full-size painting of that fire curtain in a decayed and crumbling condition. This painted drop hung at the back of the stage. The lower level of the sketch indicates a series of vibrantly colored scenic panels that had elaborate dimensional foliage on the lower two-thirds and fanciful white cloud shapes at the top. These panels began the production positioned offstage as wings. Real trees, leafless, gilded, and quite magical in the center of the acting area comprised the rest of the setting, all of which rested upon a white floor cloth.

The production began with an empty stage and a lone figure striding towards the audience, telling us of the preposterous edicts of the king. As he approached, the ornate fire curtain slowly descended, cutting the stage off from view and requiring him to finish his speech lying down, with only inches of space between the curtain and the floor. Immediately the lights came up on the forestage, and the action continued on this platform over the orchestra pit, backed by the elaborate fire curtain. As each man took his oath, he slammed his hand against the fire curtain. The commanding (yet empty and hollow) sound of this action sealed the bargain of three years of chastity and scholarly pursuits. After the men foreswore the company of women for their "little academe"--symbolized by throwing their jackets into a trap door in the stage floor and donning "academic" shirts--they raised the fire curtain, and the rest of the stage was revealed. The foliage panels, which would move onstage throughout the action, were now positioned as classical wings; and the painted, decayed version of the fire curtain hung at the back of the stage. The self-referential, recursive quality of this drop clearly communicated the idea of an ongoing and endless battle of the sexes. Metaphorically, had that curtain risen, an even more decayed version of the ornate fire curtain would have been visible behind it, and so on and so on. Again, Malina utilizes real objects to make metaphorical connections.

Of course, the avoidance of women by men did not last very long; the men soon abandoned their "academy," put back on their elaborate jackets, and rejoined the world. The costumes for both men and women were combinations and assemblages. They all had portions of a silhouette that placed them close to Shakespeare's time, but the fabric, cut, and detailing were distinctly contemporary. The men's costumes were elaborate additions to, and extensions of, contemporary items of denim clothing--jean jackets, Levis, chambray shirts, **[End Page 136]** etc. The women wore flattering, shapely, attractive costumes, all with period elements, but executed with complicated cuts, fabrics, and colors that were present-day.

The wings became the dominant scenic element as they continued to move further onstage, finally forming a kind of backdrop that then opened in the center, like sliding shutters for the entertainment that follows the masque. When the news of the king's death was received, the wings abruptly turned around, exposing their utilitarian construction. The lighting, up to that point bright and uniform, became stark and expressionistic as the fire curtain descended, sealing off the stage. For the remainder of the action, the actors played on the forestage in front of the decorative fire curtain, a scene that was brightly lit **[End Page 137]** until the very end, when the fire curtain was again raised, exposing an empty stage--white floor, black surround, and a "work-light" atmosphere. As the characters made their final exit upstage, a black curtain rose at the far back to reveal a small garden with real bushes

and trees.

By turns realistic and romantic, theatrical and illusionistic, employing period elements and staging techniques that were rearranged for contemporary sensibilities, Malina created a powerful, synthetic production. Self-referential and recursive in visual elements, physical action, and words, it had no model other than itself. The production was as self-absorbed as the action of Shakespeare's characters and the words they spoke. Malina's desire to communicate through the visual text of stage design necessitated a production style that was inclusive, not exclusive. It admitted ambiguity and ironic interplay, rather than banishing it as "distraction." [10](#)

Malina's most recent collaboration involves a production of Frantisek Hrubín's version of *Beauty and the Beast*, inspired by Jean Cocteau's 1946 film version. Directed by Miroslav Krobot, the production was staged in an outdoor theatre in the wilder half of the royal gardens attached to the castle at Cesky Krumlov. The performance took place in the middle of summer; the garden was beautiful and green, and the weather was perfect.

Although Hrubín creates his own very personal version of the legend, many of the elements of the story remain intact and familiar. At one point in the story, Beauty accepts her fate as a prisoner of the Beast and yet wonders about her relationship with him. They have not yet expressed their love for one another, but hostilities have melted into reflection. As Beauty meditates on her self-imprisonment, a curious image is revealed to the audience. Beauty is walking in a bank of snow. She is clothed from head to foot and in her hands carries a basket of roses--an already established metaphor for the Beast's love as well as his life and spirit. As she walks slowly and distractedly, a sprinkle of red rose petals trails behind her in the snow. It is an expressively rich moment. Beauty is, first of all, walking through a kind of winter--a time for reflection, a prelude to spring and rebirth (and also a metaphor for Beauty's innocence). She possesses the Beast--or at any rate, that which calls to mind the Beast in his absence from the stage. The roses have tremendous metaphorical power. The fact that she is allowed to possess them, and the fact that she feels free to dismember them and strew them across the snow as she ponders her love for this beast, are powerful, contradictory images. But within this image lies an even stronger one. Beauty is walking through the snow, but it is not snow. The audience experiences the play in the summer, surrounded by Nature's overt signs of the season--green trees, green grass, warm air, etc. The snowbank is indicated by a large, rectangular white sheet (approximately 14 by 20 feet). The borders of the illusion are evident to everyone, including, one suspects, **[End Page 138]** Beauty who chooses to remain within this artificial world of illusion even though her real world is only a few steps away. As this short scene draws to a close, Beauty bends down to take hold of the cloth. As she stands she totally envelopes herself in this metaphorical winter.

The roses can represent, on the one hand, the Beast's trust in Beauty. She, in turn, seems to dishonor that trust as she pulls the roses apart petal by petal and walks on the path they make across the snow. The petals evoke the Beast, but, as Beauty moves across the snow, the red petals seem to flow from her body. She seems both in control and helpless all at once. The added dimension of red against white relates to Beauty's loss of innocence--both voluntary and involuntary.

A series of images signify these contradictions, the total effect of which Malina describes as the "big synthesis," a central principle of Action Design. In this example, the collective action of various images help to explicate the play's many-faceted *metaphorical systems*. The various contradictions in the

scene above function with the larger image of the snow as both actual fact and artificial device. Theatrical signs ironically disclose themselves for what they are. There is no clever tapering of the illusion so that the audience might more easily suspend disbelief. Rather, we *do* see and feel this *icon* signifying snow in direct contradiction to its surroundings and perhaps see it more strongly through the renewing force of contradiction. Separate from its "signifying function," we see and experience a big white piece of cloth. Beauty's physical presence and physical use of the space make it "snow" for us. But her physical presence also reveals the illusion and initiates a chain of questions and ideas, such as, "What is the nature of this winter in the midst of what we know is summer?" "Is she aware of this contradiction?" "What does her knowledge signify?" "Why does she envelope herself in the illusion?" The image is exciting because it is so open-ended--it works in the moment, yet continues to unfold the more one reels it over in the mind. More than just a single, exciting image, the series of "broken" or self-contradictory metaphors give theatrical weight to the moment.

Conclusion

For Malina and Ciller, complex systems of signification are essential to the practice of theatre as a multifaceted communicative act. However, neither Malina or Ciller, nor any of the many other designers working in this idiom, would conclude that this practice is a closed system, for always the audience is invited to participate. In many ways, Action Design is an act of faith, as the most vital and exciting of theatre enterprises usually are--one that places a tremendous amount of power in the minds of the audience. Common to both Malina and Ciller is a joy, fascination, and satisfaction with the many ways in which the systems they set in motion take on a metaphorical life superseding [End Page 139] their original creation, a metaphorical life that takes flight with the force of possibilities.

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Notes

1. Jindrich Honzl first used the term "action" in relation to design in 1941. He was speaking of theatrical action and extolling a kind of theatre design that included the actor and the actor's transformation of the stage space. For Honzl, Action Design signified a purely functional, nondecorative type of stage design.
2. Keir Elam's *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* begins with an introduction to the subject of semiotics through an examination of its early beginnings in the 1930s and 1940s. Elam views the writings of Otakar Zich and Jan Mukarovsky as one stimulus for other theorists, such as Petr Bogatyrev, Jiři Veltrusky, and Jindrich Honzl. The works of many of these theorists contain principles that resonate with the work of Czech and Slovak scenographic artists closely associated with the beginnings of Action Design. While it is probable that pioneer Czech scenographers such as Frantisek Tröster (1904-1968) may not have viewed semiotic theory as injunctive, nevertheless the early semiotic theorists of Prague probably influenced the theory of Action Design as it was being developed. This connection has been well established by many observers, such as the contemporary Slovak theatre theoretician Ladislav Lajcha. We make the reasonable assumption that these ideas were a part of the artistic and intellectual milieu of Prague in the 1930s and 1940s.

3. Frantisek Tröster was a very influential designer and teacher. His students include Josef Svoboda, Ladislav Vychodil, and Jaroslav Malina, one of the subjects of this article. Jozef Ciller, also examined in this article, was a student of Vychodil's at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava.
4. Jozef Ciller, private conversation with Delbert Unruh, Martin, Slovakia, Fall 1991.
5. Charter 77 was a manifesto sent by Czech dissidents to the Communist authorities in Prague on New Year's Day, 1997. The manifesto was critical of then President Gustav Husák's handling of, among other conditions, human rights. The government's response was swift and harsh, but the manifesto continued to gain signatories and influence. Among the dissidents who signed the document was Vaclav Havel.
6. Jaroslav Malina was born in Prague in 1937. His early study was devoted to painting and art, and in 1961 he began his study of stage design with Frantisek Tröster at DAMU in Prague. Following his graduation from DAMU in 1964, Malina accepted an engagement with the F. X. Saldy Theatre in Liberec, a position he was to keep until 1980. From 1980 to 1982 Malina was engaged at the DVU Theatre in Hradec Králové, and in 1983 he returned to Prague and began to work freelance with a part-time job at the DP Theatre in Gottwaldov.
7. Unless noted otherwise, personal interview with Delbert Unruh, Prague, Fall 1991.
8. *The Deer King* is probably better known in the US as *King Stag*.
9. Personal interview with Delbert Unruh, Prague, 1984.
10. See also Delbert Unruh's "Postmodern Issues in Action Design: 5--The Problem Of Production Style" (1991), pp. 26-27.

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