BEHIND AMERICAN FOOTLIGHTS

BY ALINE BERNSTEIN
President of The Costume Institute

Mrs. Bernstein has been a professional designer for the theater for more than thirty years. She was among the first women so employed in this country. At present she leads the Educational Committee of the United Scenic Artists (local 829, A.F.L.) and serves on numerous other committees. In addition she is a visiting lecturer in the drama department of Vassar College. She is the author of four books and innumerable periodical and newspaper articles.

An enormous amount of hard, intensive work by a great many people is required in any theatrical production. The audience looking at the section of life unfolding on a stage is, for the most part, quite unaware of the number of people who have had a hand in the preparation of the play, the hours of grueling work, the anguish, and the heartache that have gone into the making of the finished performance. In spite of that, and of the possible failures and the blame, there is an unparalleled delight when we of the theater have succeeded in making magic for you of the audience. The author, the producer, the director, the actors, and the designer in combination have worked together to that end. A play is an “abstract and brief chronicle,” whether it be a realistic play or a fantasy, a musical or a ballet. On the stage it becomes, through the dramatic idiom, a recreation of life, translated from reality into illusion. Everything is selected and intensified through the filter of theatrical art to give an impression of reality greater than reality itself. This is apparent in the scenery alone: a room on a stage seems complete, though it has only three walls, instead of the proper four. The fourth is supplied in the imagination which the audience collectively brings to the theater. Between the scene on the stage and the audience out front rises and falls that wonderful intangible, the magic curtain.

Love of the theater is deep in the heart of man. Everyone loves it, both as audience and as participants in the art; for everyone is a potential actor and continues so through the seven ages, save for the first moments and the very last.

Since primitive times man has created drama, drama not only in his own image but in the image of his dreams. Proponents of religion, whether medicine men, witches, magicians, or priests, have realized the power of the drama to stir the emotions and reach the inner life of people. So, too, have kings and dictators; they deck their ceremonies with color, gold, and jewels, pageants and parades, music and pomp. They know that no other means to this end is so effective.

The transition from the purely religious plays of the Middle Ages to the professional theater of today has required a long journey through the years, but the change was sure to come. The power of the theater to disseminate ideas, its entertainment value, and its commercial value were bound to break through the resistance of tradition, just as water is bound to find its own level. The theater today in all its forms—the stage, the films, radio, and now television—is big business.

America has a rich theatrical past, which followed the pioneers from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The first building for the sole purpose of housing theatrical entertainment in the North Atlantic colonies was erected by William Levingston for the Staggs, a family of dancers, in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1716. The still famous Dock Street Theatre in Charleston, South Carolina, was built in 1736. Where there were no theaters, performances were given in town halls and meeting houses and in the ballrooms of the mansions of wealthy families throughout the South. The South was fertile soil for the growth of the drama; for Southerners were not hampered by the puritanical spirit of the people of the New England colonies.
human understanding of the still unmatched Greek playwrights, and some of them must have longed to see the characters come to life on the stage. Departments of Drama for the study of plays and play production, with full academic credit, are a comparatively recent development in our colleges; they are evidence, also, of the acceptance of the drama and of the rise in social position of the participants in the art.

New York City saw its first professional play, Farquhar's farce, "The Recruiting Officer," in 1732. It was played in the loft of a building owned by Rip Van Dam and known thereafter as the New Theatre. The venture must have been profitable, for Van Dam altered other buildings to house other productions. In his History of the New York Stage, T. Allston Brown describes one eighteenth-century theater thus: "The stage was raised five feet from the floor. The scenes, curtains, and wings were carried by the managers in their 'property' trunks. A green curtain was suspended from the ceiling. A pair of paper screens were erected upon the right and left hand sides, for wings. Six wax lights were in front of the stage. The orchestra consisted of German flute, horn, and drum players. Suspended from the ceiling was a chandelier, made of a barrel hoop, through which were driven half a dozen nails, into which were stuck as many candles. Two drop scenes, representing a castle and a wood, [with] bits of landscape, river, and mountain, comprised the scenery." Later, in 1767, a true theater, known as the John Street Theatre, was built in New York.

The acting was probably as crude as the scenery in the performances of colonial times. A few professional players, both individuals and troupes, came over from England, some no doubt having that rare gleaming quality that all actors must have for success. In the communities where plays were permitted the companies were often augmented by amateurs, occasionally even by local belles. In Philadelphia the English army organized companies among themselves to relieve the monotony of their lives, playing English farces and comedies and some of Shakespeare's plays. Frequently we do the same today in rural and suburban communities...
and in the camps of our armed forces.

The nineteenth century ushered in some of the great actors and actresses of the American stage. From then on, the quality of production has improved steadily in every phase; acting, housing in proper buildings, presentation, and décor have marched steadily on to the high professional quality of today. Though the stage will never be perfect, it always advances. There will be, as usual, fine plays and poor plays in any season, but the good days of the theater are ever with us.

The drama is the only art in which so many kinds of mind and hand are employed; for a play does not exist fully as an entity until it is performed, until the actors speak their parts in costume and move about on the stage under the lights. First in importance is the playwright; following him come the producer and director, the actors and actresses, and the designer. They must be of one accord; their work must add up ultimately to the author’s idea. With so many people of such varied temperaments and skill, it is surprising that unity is achieved so often; that is one of the wonders of working in the profession. Although the association of all of these people is necessarily brief, confined to the few weeks’ working time allowed for the preparation of any production, the group is bound together in a singularly intimate way—they are a world in themselves. When the play’s run is over, the world comes apart, and they go their separate ways.

In its current exhibition, Behind American Footlights, the Costume Institute has caught and brought back to you some of the magic of both the near and the distant past. Here are gathered together costumes, drawings, and stage models representing theatrical design in America since the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Prints and photographs of historical interest are also shown. A print said to have been made at the time of the American Revolution, but probably of a much later date, shows the interior of the John Street Theatre. The Park, the Bowery, the Astor Place Opera House, and Niblo’s Garden are among the many other New York theaters represented. Other prints and a number of photographs show actors and actresses who have been dear to American theatergoers—among them the native-born Edwin Forrest and Edward L. Davenport and such distinguished visitors as Edmund Kean and his son Charles, Helena Modjeska, and Sarah Bernhardt. There is also a charming photograph of Mrs. Maurice Barrymore (who was John Drew’s sister and a fine actress herself) with her three gifted children, Ethel, Lionel, and John.

On platforms framed in painted curtains that imitate the old proscenium draperies, we present costumes that have been worn by stage favorites past and present. These are not the clothes of real life; they are stage costumes. The moment an actor comes on the stage he is in costume. He represents the character the author has created, and he must look like that character. Added to the effect of the costume, of
course, is the actor's own special quality, the personality that lives in our memory. Who can possibly forget Helen Hayes as Queen Victoria or Harriet Beecher Stowe? We show you one costume from each of these roles, each in its own way a piece of character designing.

Minnie Maddern Fiske was one of the most honored and beloved of American actresses, and her performance of Becky Sharp was her most brilliant. It was so true, so sure, that she might have been Thackeray's model for the character. Her costumes of the time of the battle of Waterloo are in the fashion of that day; what is more important, they speak of the kind of woman she portrayed, the etched sharpness and the essential shoddiness in her make-up.

In the role of Madame Trentoni in "Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines," Ethel Barrymore made her first hit. Her brothers were then still on their way to stardom, but the family was rich in their inheritance of talent from the Drews and the older Barrymores. She wore the gown we exhibit in her first big success. It is a fluffy net, rose-trimmed evening gown, so sweet, so naive, yet so theatrical. Too bad that we cannot recapture the richness of her voice or the elegance of her presence.

But the greatest of all performers, the one revered above any other in American theatrical memory, is Edwin Booth. Three of his costumes have been lent to the Costume Institute for the exhibition: one from "Othello" and two from "Hamlet." One of the last, with lilac-colored bands trimming the sleeves and a cloak lined with purple, he wore for many years; some say it was never replaced. It is shabby and parts shiny with wear, and some of the stitches of the knitted girdle have been frayed away by the countless times his hands tied it.

The purpose of stage scenery is to inclose the space on the stage in which the action of the play is to take place: to establish the locale; to create the mood; to provide a suitable background for the actors and proper entrances and exits. Stage scenery is not interior decoration. The designer must add to the enchantment of the audience by the truth and beauty of his settings, whether they represent a palace, a drawing room, a kitchen, a slum, a garden, a jungle, or a scene in heaven. He can be so literal that he uses a real electric stove in a set to cook a meal, or so fanciful that he represents a tall building by a flight of windows hanging in space against a misty curtain. A stage may be limited in footage, but there is no limit to the creative beauty possible on its boards.

Until sometime in the eighties it was the custom for a manager to order directly from a studio the kind of scene he wanted. The studio furnished him sketches and models, and the artists who made the sketches painted the finished scenes. For many years the stage was set with painted wings, usually three pairs, with an elaborate painted backdrop, no ceiling, and some hanging borders. Our musical shows still use this type of setting, with wings and a backdrop, successfully; it contributes to the swift pace demanded. Sometime before the nineties the boxed set came into use for interiors, with a ceiling, real doors for entrances and exits, and windows that could open and close to help indicate the time of year and through which to view the world outside.

Some of the drawings in the exhibition show the unbelievably beautiful realistic painting of the designers of the earlier type of set. Moldings, marble columns, curtains, draperies, and scenes of incredible distance were painted so that it almost needed the hand's touch to know that they were not real. There are few, if any, painters today who can equal the work of these men, most of whom are unknown to the present generation of theater-goers but whose sketches and models are assembled here.

Before the First World War two designers from abroad, the great Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig, were influential in changing the style of stage scenery and lighting and introducing the scene designer as he functions today. At that time new ideas in stage production were developing generally, and the so-called art theaters were germinating and coming to life. With them the built set, with real moldings and fireplaces and ornament in the round, came into use. These sets, like the earlier ones, required painting, but of a different kind. Except in stock companies and summer theaters, the designer no longer paints his own settings.

LEFT TO RIGHT: Costume worn by Helen Hayes as Harriet Beecher Stowe in “Harriet” by Ryerson and Clements, 1943; designed by Aline Bernstein. Costume worn by Miss Hayes in “Victoria Regina” by Laurence Housman, 1935; designed by Rex Whistler. Costume worn by Katharine Cornell in “The Barretts of Wimpole Street” by Rudolf Besier, 1931; designed by Jo Mielziner. Costume worn by Clare Eames in Shaw’s “Man of Destiny,” 1925; designed by Carolyn Hancock. Lent by the Eaves Costume Company, the Museum of the City of New York, and Miss Cornell.
Much was lost by the change, and much was gained. The loss has been in the superb painting of the earlier designers, both in the sketch and in the finished scene. It is a kind of scene painting we may never see again. The gain lies in a psychological approach to design, in a closer relation of scenery and costumes to the content of a play, and, with the development of new playwrights, in a wider social consciousness.

Science has put into the hands of the designer a great instrument of beauty, electric light. Until electricity was used for stage lighting, candles, gas light, and lime lights merely illuminated. Now stage lighting equipment has been developed to a point of remarkable flexibility, making it possible to achieve the most wonderful dramatic effects. The lighting of a play is now one of the most important tasks of the designer; in fact, it makes a scene what it is.

Most of the drawings for scenery and costumes in the exhibition are the work of the men and women who have made and are still making the visible beauty of our theater in this generation—among them designers who were in the advance guard not so long ago and many brilliant new ones. The drawings are essentially working drawings; in no sense are they pictures intended to be hung on a wall, although many of them are very beautiful. They were made to submit to a producer or director and for the use of the craftsmen who execute the designs—the builders, the painters, the property-makers, and the costumers. The scenery designs must be supplemented with measured drawings, from which sets of blueprints are made for the builders and for general use.

The theater is ephemeral. A play is produced and has its run, and at the close its parts are scattered. Properties and costumes are sold to be used again for rental, and the scenery either goes to a warehouse or suffers a worse fate and goes down the river to be burned. (It is more expensive to cart and store scenery than to build it new.) But plays, and particularly individual actors and actresses, live in the memory. Theater-goers have almost as much fun discussing what they have seen and loved as they had out of the original performances. They associate themselves sentimentally with their theatrical past.

The Costume Institute is happy to have brought the theater within its walls for the enjoyment of its members and the visiting public; and we hope that the people of the theater, both the visitors and the exhibitors, will put to use the wealth of material in the Costume Institute and in the Metropolitan Museum for their entertainment, their research, and the furtherance of their creative work.