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**NEW MORGAN EXHIBITION EXAMINES THE ARTISTRY
AND INNOVATION OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY STAGE DESIGN**

**Show Features Drawings, Watercolor Illustrations, Musical Scores, and
Related Material from the Russian Avant-Garde to the American Theater of the 1960s**

Creating the Modern Stage: Designs for Theater and Opera

On View May 22 through August 16

****Press Preview: Thursday, May 21, 2009, 10 a.m. until noon****

New York, NY, April 1, 2009—The twentieth century saw a renaissance in the art of the theater. Modern technology and materials allowed for innovative approaches to stage sets. New theories concerning the role of the actor and set in theatrical performances encouraged a radical departure from long-standing practices and the moribund literalism of the nineteenth-century stage. Imagination and vision were encouraged, allowing a vital and varied stagecraft to emerge throughout England, Europe, Russia, and America.



Alexandra Exter, *Construction for a Tragedy*, ca. 1925.
Gift of Mrs. Donald M. Oenslager, 1982.

This extraordinary period of innovation in modern scenic design is the subject of a new exhibition at The Morgan Library & Museum entitled *Creating the Modern Stage: Designs for Theater and Opera*. On view from May 22 through August 16, 2009, the exhibition features over fifty drawings derived entirely from the Morgan's holdings, principally from the collection formed by the celebrated American set designer Donald Oenslager (1902–1975). Enriching these colorful drawings is related material, including musical scores, rare books, and autograph manuscripts as well as more than thirty performance photographs documenting the finished set.

“This exhibition offers the visitor the opportunity to see a remarkable trove of designs for the stage that are rarely put on view at the Morgan,” said William M. Griswold, the museum’s director. “It is fascinating to see how experimentation in stagecraft in the twentieth century paralleled similar explorations in the other

arts. The drawings are beautiful and imaginative visions of what the modern stage could be by artists willing to push boundaries and move beyond accepted conventions.”

ORGANIZATION OF THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition is divided into four thematic sections—Origins of Modern Scenic Theory, Destroying Tradition, the Russian Avant-Garde, and Diversity of the American Stage—together emphasizing the international scope of advances in set design.

ORIGINS OF MODERN SCENIC THEORY



Mihail Fedorovitch Andreenko, *The Acrobats: Scene for a ballet*, ca. 1927. Gift of Mrs. Donald M. Oenslager, 1982.

The exhibition opens with visionary drawings for the stage by Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966) as well as texts fundamental to the foundation of modern scenic theory by Craig and the Swiss stage designer Adolphe Appia (1862–1928). Appia spurred a move toward visual simplicity and a unity of aesthetic elements in set design and direction, in part through his 1899 book, *Die Musik und die Inszenierung* (Music and Set Design). Appia’s innovations of modern stage design was essential to the work of Craig, whose *Art of the Theatre* (1905) set out principles for an imaginative and suggestive, rather than literal, approach to set design. These radical ideas—the “new stagecraft”—would gradually transform European theater through sporadic experimental productions and revolutionize theater design in the ensuing generations.

DESTROYING TRADITION

At the beginning of the twentieth century, ideas about the new stagecraft spread through the Continent and into central and eastern Europe. A synthesis of the arts was elemental to several avant-garde movements, such as the Austrian Sezession and the German Jugendstil. Artists became more involved in the theater, which revitalized scenic design and resulted in new and daring productions throughout Europe’s theatrical capitals.

Fostering such experiments were adventurous directors like Max Reinhardt, whose Deutsches Theater in Berlin was at the forefront of the technical innovation that characterized modern European stagecraft. Reinhardt’s large-scale revolving stage, for example, allowed for a greater variety of settings and rapid changes between scenes that intensified the audience’s engagement with the performance.

The break from aesthetic tradition is documented in dramatic designs by German Expressionists, including Ludwig Sievert and Emil Orlik. Sievert’s design for a 1922 staging of Kokoschka and Hindemith’s opera

Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen (Murderer, Hope of Women) depicts a moment of confrontation between Man and Woman echoed in the angular and aggressive forms of the set. During and immediately following World War II when materials were scarce, Berlin designers' clever use of available resources continued to push the limits of convention. Dialogue, set, and movement were fused together to create a comprehensive theatrical experience, achieving a potent combination of content and design.

THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE



Léon Bakst, *Prologue for Les Orientales*, 1910. Gift of Mrs. Donald M. Oenslager, 1982.

The Moscow Art Theater, founded in 1899, represented the vanguard of innovation. The collaboration between producers and designers, many of whom were painters, yielded an exceptional standard of stagecraft. At the center of this phenomenon was *Mir iskusstva* (World of Art), a group that emerged in St. Petersburg during the late 1900s. Beyond founding a journal, members Alexandre Benois, Serge Diaghilev, and Léon Bakst designed and executed dance and theater productions in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Shortly thereafter, avant-garde artists Alexandra Exter, Natalia

Goncharova, and Nikolaï Pavlovich Akimov broke further from conventional set design, using as their guide abstract approaches influenced by Cubism and Constructivism. The lively history of Russian folk traditions also informed the aesthetic of their sets.

Bakst's drawing for one of Diaghilev's ballets, *Les Orientales* features a cascading arrangement of drapery, a hallmark of his designs that conveys the romantic tendencies of *Mir iskusstva*. Also included is Exter's *Construction for a Tragedy*, a design typical of her skeletal architectural constructions which emphasized purity of form and demonstrated an inventive approach to structures. Soaring black vertical frames and ascending diagonal ramps of bright orange create independent, yet interconnected, spaces that could accommodate a wide variety of performances.

DIVERSITY OF THE AMERICAN STAGE

On stages throughout the United States, the vaudeville tradition of the early years of the twentieth century gave rise to the genre of musical theater, a distinctly American art form. Actors were in demand for both stage and screen, and the Depression inspired socially conscious plays as well as comedies. American theater also benefited from an influx of European and Russian designers, who brought their experience to New York and other major theater centers in the United States.

A new American stagecraft originated largely in the work of Robert Edmond Jones (1887–1954), one of the

principal designers responsible for its reinvigoration. He aimed to unify the elements of acting, lighting, and setting through his dramatic use of abstract forms and lyrical tonal effects. To disseminate these innovations, Jones, along with Lee Simonson, published texts on the subject, creating a major body of literature on the history of scenic design. The exhibition further chronicles modern developments in stage design through drawings by Claude Fayette Bragdon, Woodman Thompson, and Norman Bel Geddes; also included are designs for musical theater by Serge Soudeikine, Erté, and Oliver Smith.



Donald Oenslager, *Banks of Salinas River for Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men*, 1937. Gift of Mrs. Donald M. Oenslager, 1982.

Donald Oenslager designed the sets and lighting for *Of Mice and Men* in its original production, which opened at New York's Music Box Theater in November 1937 and ran for 207 performances. Steinbeck's novel, published earlier that year, presented Oenslager with the challenge of realizing on stage a narrative that was enjoying contemporary critical attention. Accompanying the drawing in the exhibition are tickets and programs

related to the production as well as a carbon typescript belonging to Clare Luce, who played the lead female role. It is a true working copy: Luce annotated it throughout, including directions concerning her voice, eye movements, physical gestures, and the wording of her lines.

Eugene Berman is one of the best known New York stage designers of the 1940s and 1950s. Born in Russia, he fled during the revolution and worked in Paris before emigrating to America in 1940. As a set designer, he rejected the abstract aesthetic established by Appia and Craig in favor of more evocative, elegant, and richly colored settings, often on a vast scale and replete with ruins and mysterious light. Such practices can be seen in his designs for *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, a one-act opera commissioned by NBC television from the composer Gian Carlo Menotti in 1951.

THE OENSLAGER COLLECTION

“Working on a sketch for a setting is probably the happiest and briefest part of the artist's work in the theater,” wrote Donald Oenslager. As a young man, he began collecting drawings, rare books, and prints related to the theater dating from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries. His collection, built throughout his prolific career as a designer and professor at the Yale University School of Drama, provides a comprehensive history of stage design over the course of four centuries. Totalling approximately 1,600 sheets, the collection was presented to the Morgan by Oenslager's widow in 1982.

Creating the Modern Stage: Set Designs for Theater and Opera is organized by Jennifer Tonkovich, curator of drawings and prints, with the assistance of Elizabeth Nogrady, Moore Curatorial Fellow, The Morgan Library & Museum.

Creating the Modern Stage was made possible through the generosity of Jane and Robert Carroll and Eliot and Wilson Nolen. Generous assistance is also provided by the David L. Klein Jr. Foundation and the Tobin Theatre Arts Fund.



This program is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Film Screening with Live Music

Metropolis

(1926, 79 minutes)

Director: Fritz Lang

Club Foot Orchestra East

Richard Marriott, composer

Richard Marriott and the members of the Club Foot Orchestra provide live musical accompaniment to Fritz Lang's revolutionary silent film, whose dark vision of a technological future has become iconic.

Friday, June 5, 7 PM

Tickets: \$15 for Non-Members; \$10 for Members

Family Programs

Opera ABCs: Children's Guide to Porgy and Bess

Join opera singer and educator Jennifer S. Greene for an interactive and family-friendly exploration of excerpts from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* performed by live artists. In this workshop, children will learn about what it takes to be a professional singer, discover Gershwin's distinct blending of classical forms with jazz improvisation, and have an opportunity to sing along with musical selections. Appropriate for ages 6–14.

Saturday, May 30, 2–3 PM

Tickets: Adults: \$8 for Non-Members; \$6 for Members; Children: \$2

Blocking Out Space

Discover how to block out space for the stage in this engaging art-making workshop with Studio in a School installation artist Jo Beth Ravitz. Children will learn how artists conceive space for the stage and then will construct their own unique set design models out of wooden blocks. All materials are included.

Appropriate for ages 6–12.

Saturday, June 13, 2–4 PM

Tickets: Adults: \$6 for Non-Members; \$4 for Members; Children: \$2

Gallery Talk

Creating the Modern Stage: Designs for Theater and Opera

Elizabeth Nogrady, Moore Curatorial Fellow, Drawings and Prints, The Morgan Library & Museum

Friday, June 12, 7 PM

Discussion

Designer Spotlight: Creating the Modern Stage

Join award-winning designers for an engaging discussion about the creative process as well as the challenges they face when transforming sketches into fully realized productions. Participants include set designer and co-chair of the design department at the Yale School of Drama Ming Cho Lee (*King Lear* and the 1967 original Off-Broadway production of *Hair*), lighting designer Jennifer Tipton (New York City Ballet and the Paul Taylor Dance Company), and set designer Michael Yeargan (*South Pacific* and the forthcoming Metropolitan Opera production of Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*). The program will be moderated by New York City Opera dramaturg Cori Ellison.

Tuesday, June 23, 6:30 PM*

Tickets: \$15 for Non-Members; \$10 for Members

*The exhibition *Creating the Modern Stage: Designs for Theater and Opera* will be open at 5:30 PM especially for lecture attendees.

The Morgan Library & Museum

A complex of buildings in the heart of New York City, The Morgan Library & Museum began as the private library of financier Pierpont Morgan, one of the preeminent collectors and cultural benefactors in the United States. Today it is a museum, independent research library, musical venue, architectural landmark, and historic site. A century after its founding, the Morgan maintains a unique position in the cultural life of New York City and is considered one of its greatest treasures. With the 2006 reopening of its newly renovated campus, designed by renowned architect Renzo Piano, the Morgan reaffirmed its role as an important repository for the history, art, and literature of Western civilization from 4000 B.C. to the twenty-first century.

General Information

The Morgan Library & Museum

225 Madison Avenue, at 36th Street, New York, NY 10016-3405

212.685.0008

www.themorgan.org

Hours

Tuesday–Thursday, 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; extended Friday hours, 10:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; closed Mondays, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day. The Morgan closes at 4 p.m. on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve.

Admission

\$12 for adults; \$8 for students, seniors (65 and over), and children (under 16); free to Members and children, 12 and under accompanied by an adult. Admission is free on Fridays from 7 to 9 p.m. Admission is not required to visit the Morgan Shop.