

Aberystwyth University

Talk given at the 'Out of the Box and Dusted Down: Foraging and Findings' Seminar

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Banham, Simon. Out of the Box and Dusted Down: Foraging and Findings. A collective event to welcome Honorary Departmental Fellow Barbara Cavanagh and introduce the International Theatre Collection. Foyer, Parry Williams Building, 12th May 2009, 6pm.

In search of Neher: notes from a presentation

A few days before I came to the archive a theatre director called Annie Castledine phoned me after many years silence, Annie had been a significant person in my early career as a designer, instrumental in developing my sense of design as an environment that responded to and developed the space that it inhabited.

I think I am probably now the age she was then, when we first worked together.

The abiding memory I have of Annie is her constant quoting of fragments of Brecht's poems, notably those that related to design or to his relationship with his designer, Casper Neher.

*"That blue piece of washing,
My friend would have placed it better"¹*

When I entered the archive the first 'stack' I chose, of course, was that labelled scenography and almost the first book I saw was Brecht's poems; Annie was obviously with me.

I cast around and found, in close proximity Why Clothes are Important– "great", I thought, "I'll wear my kilt, to upstage my words!" Written in the fifties, it included a chapter - without which no book on clothing is complete - on nakedness and how "*nudists were, usually, a happy group of people*". I decided then that to take my cue from this book might not be appropriate.

I found a book on Fred Astaire that reminded me of my early and inept attempts at drawing figures in more animated positions for my costume designs, copied from movie books of that period.

Then there was a beautiful 19th century book entitled Escenografia that I almost chose to brandish at the University whose reluctance to embrace the word Scenography has frustrated us all within the department.

Lying to one side like a discarded photo album, one man's record of his many roles in the Oberammergau, which, by the next time I visited, had disappeared; re-shelved? Awaiting rediscovery.

Prompted by thoughts of Annie, I went upstairs to what Richard Gough referred to as 'large format' section in search of Neher, where I discovered books about him that I didn't know about and pictures of designs I'd never seen.

Next to Neher I found this: Fritz Wotruba – Zeichnungen für das Theater a book about a designer whose work I didn't know, whose beautifully suggestive costume designs (which contradict everything I tell my students) captivated me.

¹ 'The Friends' *Poems 1913 - 1956*

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Behind me there were rows and rows of box files filled with envelopes. I chose one at random. Within this there was this Armour catalogue from the 1920's; the cover is broken and frayed; and inside a letter, dated 12th may 1927, written from the proprietor of the company Leopold Verch, based in Charlottenburg, Berlin to Messrs Robert White & Sons in Drury lane detailing the costs for a recent order. As well as delighting in the strong inter-war trade in theatrical armour between Germany and Britain, the quality of the book reminded me of another of Annie's oft quoted Brecht poems:

*"Of all the works of Man I like
Best those which have been used"*²

And within the same box: a small booklet - Robert Levington Sharp - The life of a Theatre Designer - this was obviously something I had to read. The struggle to create and to achieve that I recognised so well brought to mind yet another quote that I must remember to pass on to our students. This is Brecht talking about the use of the half curtain and what it might allow the spectator:

*"....don't show him too much
But show him something. And let him observe
That this is not magic but
Work my friends."*³

I flicked to the end of the pamphlet to read the last line, which, referring to his last production, said...

"There was no mention of the man who had designed the set or his untimely death."

This seemed to encapsulate the welcome invisibility of my profession!

So above all my delight was the rediscovery of an archive, the unexpected juxtapositions and chance discoveries that Google denies me, and which has allowed us all this evening to be inspired by choice...

*"with what care she selects the
objects to accompany her
character across the stage"*⁴

My plea to you – CPR is don't organise it too well, let it live by being browsed, leaving room (with apologies to Brecht, Helena Weigel and Annie Castledine) to let us

² 'Of all the works of man' *Poems 1913 – 1956*

³ 'The Curtain' *Poems 1913 - 1956*

⁴ 'Weigel's Props' *Poems 1913 – 1956*

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....take care to select the objects to accompany us across the stage.

Simon Banham
June 10, 2009