

NORMAN BEL GEDDES: A STUDY OF THREE  
UNPRODUCED DESIGNS

THESIS

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## PREFACE

The purpose of this study is threefold: to examine three unproduced designs of Norman Bel Geddes that had an impact on the theatrical world of mounted productions; to present information about Bel Geddes' career in the theatre; and to discover the factors that prevented these designs from being executed. The three plays for which Bel Geddes created the unproduced designs are: King Lear, The Divine Comedy, and Lazarus Laughed.

In order to analyze the impact and to ascertain the mitigating factors that surround these designs, I have examined artifacts now housed in the Norman Bel Geddes Collection of the Hoblitzelle Theatre Arts Library at the University of Texas at Austin. They consist of prompt scripts; drawings; plans; sketches of settings, costumes and lighting; reviews of the productions; personal and business correspondence and Bel Geddes' notes and personal papers.

I wish to thank Mr. Frederick J. March who inspired and directed this study, Dr. J. Peter Coulson and Dr. Philip Salem who patiently guided me through the maze of thesis organization, and who, through their high standards of excellence, forced me to do my best work. Their advice and assistance in editing the paper have been invaluable. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. William H. Crain, curator of the Hoblitzelle Theatre Arts Library of the University of Texas at Austin for making the Norman Bel Geddes Collection available to me, to Mr. Edwin Neal for leading me through the collection as Virgil led Dante in The Divine Comedy and to the Hoblitzelle Theatre Arts Collection, Humanities Research Center, the University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas for all photographs used herein. To the other members of the SWTSU drama faculty who were not on my Committee and to Mr. William R. Atchison and Dr. Arthur J. Beer, Jr., I wish to express appreciation for their contributions to my theatre education. My father has contributed materially to the successful completion of this thesis by supplying the necessary financial aid. Of course, my mother, wife and daughter have given me moral

support, female innuendos, prodding verbal assistance, and relaxing diversions throughout the entire period. Finally, I owe my wife Joan special thanks for all the hours she has spent in editing and typing the manuscript.

H.C.J. III



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Norman Bel Geddes typifies the self-made American man. Although he was a junior high school dropout, he was later asked to contribute to the Encyclopaedia Britannica. He ascended from odd jobs as a youth to a prominent and respected position in the business and artistic communities of the world. The extraordinarily broad scope of his interests and talents permitted him to focus his attention on many aspects of life. Effects of this attention are still felt. His ideas, some of which were put into practice--others which remained on the drawing board, influence and inspire practitioners in the fields of art and industry today. From humble beginnings he was to become a world-famous theatre designer of costumes, stage settings, physical plants, and stage direction techniques. Later he designed commercial items such as refrigerators, scales, automobiles, radios and retail

store window display techniques. He established the profession of industrial designer when he became the first designer of national reputation to offer industrial design service from his headquarters in New York where he surrounded himself with a staff of draftsmen and specialists. Importantly, it was these technicians who prepared the technical drawings for his most magnificent conceptions: his theatres, hotels, trains, ocean liners, transcontinental airplanes, television stations, model cities, and a transcontinental highway system. "As in the case of Leonardo da Vinci, there was very little in his visible world which did not receive the attention of his drawing board."<sup>1</sup>

Norman Melancton Geddes<sup>2</sup> was born in Adrian, Michigan on April 27, 1893, the first son of Clifton Terry Geddes and Flora Yingling Geddes. He was raised in

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick J. Hunter, Catalog of the Norman Bel Geddes Theatre Collection: Humanities Research Center University of Texas at Austin (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1973), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>The name Norman Bel Geddes results from the addition of his wife's first name (Belle) to his own following their marriage. It came into general usage as his name thereafter.

the comfort of an affluent family until a national financial panic reversed the family fortune. They moved to Chicago for a time, until further setbacks forced the family to move to Saginaw, Ann Arbor, Newcomerstown and Detroit. Following the death of his father, Norman and Mrs. Geddes shared the responsibilities of supporting the family. Mrs. Geddes taught music lessons and directed choirs while Norman worked at the jobs available to boys his age: selling newspapers, shining shoes, and delivering groceries for his grandfather's store.<sup>3</sup>

Bel Geddes' youth was not without artistic stimulation. His mother's work exposed him to music. His active interest in drawing was encouraged by family trips to the galleries of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Field Museum of Natural History. In 1901, at the age of eight, Bel Geddes attended his first theatrical

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<sup>3</sup>For a detailed account of Norman Bel Geddes' early life, see his autobiography Miracle in the Evening, ed. William Kelley (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1960). Much of the material in this section is drawn from this source. A more extensive manuscript version of this autobiography is preserved in the Norman Bel Geddes Collection of the Hoblitzelle Theatre Arts Library, University of Texas at Austin, File #AE.

performance at the Iroquois Theatre in Chicago where Joseph Jefferson was starring in Rip Van Winkle. Bel Geddes recounts his impression of this experience in his autobiography.

Whenever anyone read a story to me after this first theater experience, or even if I read it for myself, I could not help thinking about how it would be acted on the stage--how the set would look, how the people would speak their lines, how much more real everything would become. . . . Books required pages to tell me what, on the stage, I could grasp in an instant, and realization of this so stimulated my imagination that, from that time forward, it has controlled and colored almost all of my conscious life.<sup>4</sup>

Bel Geddes pursued his artistic interests throughout his adolescent years. He continued his drawing and sketching, and involved himself in activities of a theatrical nature as well. In Saginaw, Michigan, he organized his friends into an amateur theatrical group. The shows, presented on a home-made stage in a barn, were "original" scripts liberally cribbed from touring professional companies. The venture slowly died from the lack of audience attendance. As a teenager, Bel Geddes had a brief excursion into the professional performing world as

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<sup>4</sup>Geddes, Miracle, p. 19.

"Zedsky, the Boy Magician" and "Bob Blake, Excentric Comedian." The magic act had a modicum of success at local vaudeville houses, but the parody routine was the victim of a series of wrong cues from the piano player and consequently closed on opening night. Nevertheless, the novice's enthusiasm for the theatre was not dampened.

Formal education often interfered with Bel Geddes' development as an artist. His interest in drawing caused him to be expelled from school when he did caricatures of the teacher and principal on the classroom blackboard. A cartoonist for the Cleveland Plain Dealer, James H. Donahey, who had been similarly expelled from the same school, sympathetically came to the rescue when he heard of the case. He arranged to enroll Bel Geddes in the Cleveland Institute of Art, to the relief of school authorities and the Bel Geddes family alike.

After studying at the Institute, Bel Geddes spent a summer at a Blackfeet Indian reservation in Montana, under the auspices of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, where he painted and sketched all the aspects of Indian life. He began his second year of studies in



the fall of 1912, at the Chicago Art Institute. He financed his education with numerous part-time jobs, among them acting, as an extra, in the Chicago Opera. He was qualified less because of his acting skills and more for his ability to ride and control horses running on a treadmill. He was briefly employed at the Chicago office of the Barnes-Crosby Engraving Company with whom he later achieved recognition for his color poster design.

During this period Bel Geddes developed an association with artist Henrik Lund, who was in Chicago with a touring exhibit of paintings by himself and other Scandinavian artists. Lund took an interest in Bel Geddes and they were together in every possible free moment for the duration of the exhibit's booking. Lund encouraged Bel Geddes to continue and develop his work and to be his own major critic. He stressed the importance of relying on one's own judgment and ability first rather than on the criticism of others. Bel Geddes followed this advice throughout his life.

The next two years proved to be one of the most important periods for Bel Geddes. He concluded his formal study at the end of the term and moved to Detroit to

assume the financial support of his mother and brother, Dudley. There, in a short time, he became a successful commercial artist for the Barnes-Crosby Engraving Company; expanding the scope of the company's operation, he introduced color plates, custom-mixed ink colors, and simplified and modernized advertising approaches. It was, however, after office hours that he did his most important work.

During free time he developed his dramatic and design theories. He began a rigorous program of play reading including works of Ibsen, Strindberg, Maeterlinck, Shaw, Wilde, and Hauptmann. He attended professional performances featuring Mrs. Pat Campbell in Pygmalion; George Arliss in The Devil; Maude Adams in The Little Minister; Otis Skinner in Kismet; and Robert Mantell in Macbeth. He also saw The Melting Pot, Seven Keys to Baldpate, Richelieu, King Lear, Hamlet, and a dozen vaudeville performances. He compared each specific production to his analysis of the dramatic content of the work. It was his practice to read each play before viewing a production, then to match his expectations to the presentation that evening.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

Bel Geddes analyzed every aspect of the theatrical production from the various viewpoints of playwright, actor, director, scenic designer, and theatre building architect. "For practice, he would edit, write stage directions, and plan the setting and movement . . . just as he was to do later for every production which he directed."<sup>6</sup> He tested his theories about each element on model stages he built for that purpose on which he staged plays in miniature, including every aspect of production. It was on these stages that the basic idea was developed for the first 1000 watt focus spotlight which Bel Geddes claims to have invented. He used this spotlight for a special effect in An Arabian Night, a play co-authored by himself and Helen Belle Schneider, which was given a matinee performance by the Detroit theatrical producer Jessie Bonstelle in 1914. Here he also illustrated his theory of front lighting a stage with spotlights from the balcony rail position, which has been generally adopted by proscenium theatres today. A director's technique of "blocking" a play was also studied, first with

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<sup>6</sup>Hunter, Catalog, p. 2.

chess pieces and later with sculpted "in scale" actor statues.

One of Bel Geddes' most important projects in this period was his conception of a production based on the Thunderbird legend he learned of when he lived with the Blackfeet Indians. He wrote four scenarios for Thunderbird: one version entirely in dialogue, one in pantomime, one entirely in terms of mood and symbolism, and a fourth in music and sound. He combined the scenarios into one manuscript which he later presented to Helen Belle Schneider, his first collaborator and, still later, his first wife.

Bel Geddes was dividing his time and attention between his career in posters and his avocation of theatre interests. While on a business trip to New York, after watching helplessly while David Belasco took credit for revolutionary lighting techniques, Bel Geddes decided that theatre, not posters, would be his life work. Upon returning to Detroit, he went to the office telling himself that he was betraying his true vocation.

One morning Bel Geddes arrived at his office, his customary two hours late, to find an annoyed

representative from the main office waiting. The official proceeded to lecture Bel Geddes on promptness and ended with an attack on outside theatre activities. He stressed that a person can not make a success of a business while nursing secret desires to make a success of something else. Bel Geddes remembered the encounter vividly.

Then Mr. Steity tossed everything at me: the bird in the hand argument; my youth; how lucky I was; playing safe instead of gambling; security against uncertainty; my earnings of two hundred dollars a week; my reputation as a poster designer; consideration for my mother and brother, and prospective bride. I listened impatiently, and he went back to Chicago saying that I had to make up my mind between posters and the theater within twenty-four hours.<sup>7</sup>

The following morning Norman Bel Geddes telephoned the main office of Barnes-Crosby and quit.

The fates seemed to favor this decision, for one week later a friend introduced Bel Geddes to Charles Wakefield Cadman, a popular American composer who used Indian themes exclusively in his compositions. Cadman received a manuscript of Thunderbird and an invitation to see a miniature performance at Bel Geddes' house.

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<sup>7</sup>Geddes, Miracle, p. 151.

Cadman, who was delighted with Bel Geddes' play and model stage, signed a contract to do the music on the spot. He sent a long telegram to Aline Barnsdall inviting her to a performance. Miss Barnsdall was organizing a permanent experimental theatre in Los Angeles for the purpose of producing plays with American themes. When she arrived the next day, the private miniature production of Thunderbird convinced her of Bel Geddes' talent and she contracted him to produce, direct, and design the show at her new theatre. He was also contracted to design any of her other productions in the next twelve months.

With his theatre career underway, it was time to make another major decision in his life. Helen Belle Schneider collaborated on many projects and added an intellectual quality to Bel Geddes' rough ideas as an editor. In January of 1916, she began to edit InWhich, the magazine that Bel Geddes published with his brother as an idea forum for their friends and relations. Norman Bel Geddes was in love with "Bel," as she preferred to be called, and determined that now was the time for them to marry. Despite the objections of her father, they were

married and the April 1916 issue of InWhich carried the following notice:

And now they tell how Norman Geddes of Detroit made his way to Toledo one evening, to return the day following, no more a bachelor but in company with Bel Geddes, who only a few hours before had been Bel Schneider. So now there is no Norman Geddes or Bel Schneider, but Norman Bel Geddes. . . .<sup>8</sup>

In Los Angeles, Bel Geddes supervised the construction of his scenic designs for Thunderbird. His friends in the Blackfeet nation personally constructed authentic costumes for the productions. Unfortunately, none of the actors in the new company possessed the physical attributes to portray Indians. When the costumes arrived they would not fit any of the actors. The production was postponed while an unsuccessful search was conducted for the correct physical types. Thunderbird was eventually cancelled for the season. It never reached production.

The 1916-1917 season did see some of Bel Geddes' designs on the boards: Ossip Dimov's Nju, Papa by Zoe

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<sup>8</sup> Norman Bel Geddes, InWhich, April 1916, unpaginated, File #4, WM-1, Norman Bel Geddes Collection, Hoblitzelle Theatre Arts Library University of Texas at Austin, hereafter designated as the Bel Geddes Collection.

Akins, and The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd by D. H. Lawrence. With these designs the theatrical world had its first exposure to the fresh creative talent of young designer Norman Bel Geddes.<sup>9</sup> As the season progressed, however, the Barnsdall company encountered morale and management difficulties which finally caused its dissolution. One contributor to low morale was the failure of Miss Barnsdall and architect Frank Lloyd Wright to agree on an acceptable theatre building and community complex to house the company and its work.

In Bel Geddes' opinion, Wright was mistaken in his unyielding insistence on classical Greek theatre as a model for the Los Angeles project. Bel Geddes believed the Classic Greek theatre developed from the drama of its day. The architect of today should design a theatre fitted to the drama of today and, if possible, of tomorrow. Bel Geddes maintained a concept of production and design that illuminated the world in which he was living and utilized its materials. He so stated in his book Horizons, published in 1932:

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<sup>9</sup>Geddes, Miracle, pp. 166-69.



When working in the theater, it was my endeavor to handle my materials in terms of my own time rather than that of my grandparents. As a matter of fact, I have felt a sense of duty about it. I have felt, and still feel that it is primarily laziness and a lack of courage on the part of many of my colleague designers in the theater that they fail to do so.<sup>10</sup>

When Miss Barnsdall's company disbanded at the close of the season, Bel Geddes remained in California to direct a silent film dealing with and titled Nathan Hale. It was during work on this film that he first started thinking about the King Lear design that was so important to his later career.

For Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn he designed the Denishawn Dance Theatre, and in Santa Barbara a garden theatre was built which he designed for Carolyn B. Hastings. Further scenic design opportunities, however, were not available. A stipend from Miss Barnsdall enabled him to live while he continued personal design projects, which included: Peer Gynt, Ghosts, King Lear, Romeo and Juliet, Wilde's Salome, and an operatic version of Pelleas et Melisande by Maeterlinck and Debussy. He built models of both his setting and costume designs and

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<sup>10</sup> Norman Bel Geddes, Horizons (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1932), p. 6.

experimented with various methods of lighting them. In this personal design time the artist is seen in his most imaginative moments, unfettered by the restrictions of designing for a specific theatre within a limited budget. In this period Bel Geddes used his valuable opportunity to develop and refine his philosophies of theatre in general and design in particular.

Bel Geddes always believed that New York was the seat of theatre activity in the United States, but in 1917 he did not have the funds to move there and pursue his chosen vocation. He chanced upon an interview printed in The Literary Digest in which a patron of the arts, Otto H. Kahn, stated that he would help artists who were in financial difficulty. Bel Geddes admits surprise when his application to Kahn resulted in a gift of the necessary funds for a move across the country to pursue his career.

Once in New York, Bel Geddes contacted two former co-workers in theatre, Charles Cadman and Richard Ordynski, both of whom were connected with the Metropolitan Opera. He was permitted to design one scene from Cadman's new opera based on Indian life, Shanewis. His

design of the one scene alone received good notices from the critics. The remainder of the opera was panned. Although somewhat disappointing, this experience opened the way for further contacts and was the beginning of Bel Geddes' New York theatrical design career.

Morris Gest and William A. Brady commissioned Bel Geddes for a variety of theatre design projects in 1918, but he was more eager to continue designing and preparing productions for Winthrop Ames. Although little of their collaboration resulted in mounted successful productions, Ames stimulated the designer's imagination and provided the "brainstorming" time in which to develop designs like Anathema and King Lear. Both plays were planned for staging "in-the-round" years before an arena theatre appeared in the United States. In the summer of 1918, Bel Geddes joined the talented designer Robert Edmond Jones at the Pabst Summer Theater in Milwaukee to collaborate on setting and lights for seven operas.

Opera designs for the Chicago Opera Association and the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York gave Bel Geddes an opportunity to express himself with a complete production design and through these designs he was

accorded his first genuine recognition as a designer. To avoid stereotyping, Bel Geddes elected to freelance for a variety of producers, designing musical comedies and plays alike. It was in this period that he assisted the foundation and development of two important commercial businesses within the theatre industry: the Century Lighting Company and the Bergman scene painting studio.

Bel Geddes feared he would be pigeonholed if he designed another musical comedy after the successful Erminie (1920), so he stubbornly refused offers of that style until he could do a serious play. Opportunities of this kind were not forthcoming at this time, so he did no work at all. This inactivity made the designer increasingly depressed. One particularly depressing evening Bel Geddes chanced to read Dante's Divine Comedy. The classic poem impressed him as an excellent base on which to build a dramatic spectacle. He devoted the next three years to developing the project in every aspect. It was never produced, but the Divine Comedy project caught and held the attention of the theatrical world and firmly established Bel Geddes as an imaginative and first-rate designer.

During the following years, Bel Geddes worked on numerous productions and projects. He contributed designs for The Truth about Blayds (1922); for Winthrop Ames' The Rivals (1922); School for Scandal (1923); She Stoops to Conquer (1924) for the Players Club; Jeanne D'Arc (1925) in Paris, France; Devil in the Cheese (1926); Damn the Tears (1927); Death Takes a Holiday (1927), and numerous other productions. He also designed operas, musicals, reviews such as The Comic Supplement (1924) for Florenze Ziegfeld, and It Happened on Ice (1940), and the costumes, props, special effects, and even a revolutionary new tent for Barnum and Bailey's circus (1941). He continued to apply his genius to the design of theatre buildings, designing the Roxy Theatre in New York the Palm Beach Theatre for Joseph Urban in Florida, the Island Dance theatre and restaurant in Hollywood, the Harvard University Theatre for Professor George Pierce Baker, and the theatre complex for the Chicago World's Fair. The scope of his work included motion picture design and production in association with Cecil B. DeMille and D. W. Griffith, for whom he worked on Feet of Clay, The Sorrows of Satan and The Pit and the Pendulum.

Perhaps his most famous designs were The Divine Comedy (unproduced), The Miracle (1924) for Max Reinhardt (in which he redesigned the Century Theatre into a Gothic cathedral), and Dead End (1935) which he produced and directed himself and which proved to be his greatest financial success.

The Bel Geddes name was not unknown to the academic world. For approximately five years he taught a course in design in New York motivated by his own dissatisfaction with the quality of instruction he found in other such courses in universities and professional schools. His project of developing a text on design (possibly collaborating with Mary Adams), never progressed beyond the manuscript stage.<sup>11</sup> When he returned to America, after directing Eva LaGalliene in Jeanne D'Arc (1925) which he also designed, Professor George Pierce Baker asked him to take on the directorship of the Yale School of Drama. He did not accept. In 1925, he wrote articles titled "Modern Theory of Design" and "The

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<sup>11</sup>The manuscript is preserved in the Bel Geddes Collection File #SC-4, k.-29-37. It contains the exposition of his design theories and methods of working to achieve these theories in his designs.

Theatre and Motion Pictures" for the 14th edition of The Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Beginning in 1927, when he established his industrial design studio, Bel Geddes slowly shifted his emphasis from theatrical affairs to commercial interests. For industry he designed automobiles, factories, prefabricated service stations, radio cabinets--in fact his interests touched almost every phase of modern living. The influence of his industrial design can be felt today.<sup>12</sup>

Bel Geddes never completely exited from the stage. However, when he began to concentrate primarily on industrial design, James Rennie accused him of deserting the theatre at a time when it most needed him. Bel Geddes replied:

. . . I have not said that I am giving up the theatre, but that I intend designing for industry, and will do no more work in the theatre this season. That decision was reached on the day that Mr. Gilbert Miller closed The Patriot. Weeks of work had been put into The Patriot which closed after a run of five days. This is only one instance of my task being well done, only to have the play close, either because of failure by director, or author, in the

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<sup>12</sup>Geddes, Miracle, pp. 344-52.

enterprise. This, combined with the continued demand for my second best to suit unimaginative producers and authors had considerable to do with my decision. Then too, industry is the dominating spirit of this age. Accept it or not, it is a fact. There is nothing more wrong with it than the viewpoint of those who are unsuccessful in dealing with it. It is as absurd to condemn an artist of today for applying his ability to industry as to condemn Phidias, Giotto or Michelangelo for applying theirs to religion. But Mr. Rennie should not assume I have lost interest in the theatre. I am as enthusiastic toward it now as when I first stepped on a stage. Indeed, it is my inability to bring about what I believe to be the best in the theatre that has caused me to withdraw.<sup>13</sup>

Bel Geddes continued to contribute scenic designs and architectural improvements to the theatre. In the first half of the 1950's he designed five different kinds of television studio buildings for the National Broadcasting Company. He introduced the idea of the TV-straight-line stage and the TV-bent-line stage to NBC. These were not built because the studio executives did not share the "brilliant vision of the future which Norman Bel Geddes sustained until his death in 1958."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the enormous contribution of Norman Bel Geddes to the development of design concepts for theatre

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<sup>13</sup>File #AE, Chapter 68, Bel Geddes Collection.

<sup>14</sup>Hunter, Catalog, p. 17.



and industry can be seen with just a cursory study of his accomplishments. It is the purpose of the following chapters to examine three of these concepts in theatrical design, particularly unproduced designs, that have influenced or established a place for themselves in American theatre history.

Chapter II of this study examines Bel Geddes' King Lear design. Chapter III is devoted to the Bel Geddes' design for The Divine Comedy, which was created during the middle period of his theatrical design career. The final chapter discusses the Lazarus Laughed design which was rendered later in Bel Geddes' career when his primary interest was industrial design. Chapter IV is followed by a summary of the designs studied.

## CHAPTER II

### KING LEAR

Norman Bel Geddes' association with the extremely wealthy dilettante Aline Barnsdall proved to be one of the most valuable of his career. Her financial backing gave him the freedom to develop his philosophies and theatre ideas, including the King Lear design concept which was significant to his theatre career. He wrote:

Although the King Lear designs never got to the stage, their wide exhibition resulted in numerous favorable reviews which stood me in excellent stead when I returned to New York.<sup>1</sup>

On the advice of composer Charles Wakefield Cadman, Miss Barnsdall came to Chicago in 1915 to see a performance of Thunderbird. The Bel Geddes American Indian play was performed for her using Bel Geddes' scale model stage and tiny statues for actors. So impressive was the show that Miss Barnsdall immediately

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<sup>1</sup>Geddes, Miracle, p. 180.

took an option on production rights to the play. Amid the excitement she became very serious and explained:

I want you to know about my plans for a permanent experimental theater organization. Its purpose will be the development of American talent in writing, acting, staging, and everything else that is a part of the creative theater.<sup>2</sup>

She decided that her plans should include Bel Geddes.

"You are the one person I have been looking for," she said. "An accident of fate has brought us together. I am sure of you. You are the person who can bring into being what I want to do in the theater."<sup>3</sup>

Bel Geddes signed contracts to produce and design plays for her experimental theatre organization located in California. The actual theatre building had not yet been constructed. It was being designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and progress was slow. Other performance spaces in the local community were utilized by the assembled acting company for productions of several plays designed and produced by Bel Geddes. The theatre season of 1916-1917 came to a close and no progress had been made on the

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<sup>2</sup> Aline Barnsdall, quoted in Norman Bel Geddes, Miracle, p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> Geddes, Miracle, pp. 152-53.

permanent theatre building. The company, Bel Geddes among them, found themselves without work. Miss Barnsdall was anxious not to lose the services of her talented young designer, should her theatre be completed, so she continued his salary beyond the end of the season to retain him. Bel Geddes did not waste this free time. He explained, "Left temporarily to my own devices, I began to do scenic work on some plays that had interested me as long ago as Detroit."<sup>4</sup> King Lear was one of these plays.

A gift from Otto Kahn and a commission for some graphics work provided Bel Geddes with the resources to travel to New York City. Here he crowded into his busy days numerous trips to the offices of producers and theatre managers. He carried with him examples of his design work, among them the King Lear designs. If producers saw Bel Geddes or his work at all they were usually negative in reaction. At this time a designer as a separate artist in the theatre was still a new and unpopular idea.

One producer who listened and looked with interest was Winthrop Ames. On their first meeting, Ames

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 178-79.

advanced Bel Geddes \$250 for designing John Masefield's The Faithful. Ames delighted in the resulting sketches received one month later. In the following material, quoted from the manuscript version of his autobiography, Bel Geddes comments on his collaboration with Ames.

Of the 15 or 20 managers I called on in the solicitation of work, on my first visit, Mr. Ames was the most considerate, put me at ease, and endeavored in ten or fifteen minutes to find out if I had any ability and was worth spending any more time on. I knew within five minutes I didn't have to impress him. We both gained a lot by our relationship.<sup>5</sup>

Once he proved his design expertise to Ames' satisfaction, Bel Geddes presented another revolutionary proposal. He had shown the King Lear designs upon first arriving in New York, but Ames displayed no particular interest. Now, assured of the producer's undivided attention, he once again presented his case.

Several times you have all but pleaded with me to find a play which is as you put it, worthy of my talent, and that you would help me. I consider "Lear," such a play. . . . You know I designed Lear for a circular stage; a circular stage that could fit existing theatres. Working out the stage action on this circle stage for "Lear" has suggested a new kind of a theatre unparalleled for certain types of

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<sup>5</sup>File #AE-44, Chapter 40, Bel Geddes Collection.

plays. You have seen Prize fights, but did you ever think how much more exciting they are because the stage is in the center of the audience with crowd on all sides of the stage showing their approval? Imagine how much less effective the prize fight would be staged behind the Proscenium of a theatre, with the audience looking through the picture frame, as we have been staging all of our plays since the Elizabethan era.<sup>6</sup>

By this time Bel Geddes was very excited. He was speaking rapidly and demonstrating his points with circular ash trays and freehand sketches. He continued:

Keep the vision of that prize fighting ring in front of you; only imagine it to be a circular stage instead of a square ring; steps lead down on all sides of this stage. These steps go down out of sight of the audience, because the audience is sitting with their eye level only a foot above the stage floor level. The brilliantly lit stage is surrounded by a ring of darkness. Around this is a railing covered with black velvet so it attracts no attention. Beyond this railing surrounding the stage on all sides is the first row of seats; and listen to this, Mr. Ames: with a stage only thirty feet in diameter, six rows of seats have a capacity of eight hundred. Obviously these six rows are top priced orchestra seats, therefore the gross for eight hundred of them equals that of any average playhouse in New York. Yet we gain the intimacy of The Little.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, Bel Geddes had done a considerable amount of thinking about his plan. A series of sketches

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

combined to make a graph that laid out the difference between ground plans for settings on what Bel Geddes called the "New Stage" (his theatre-in-the-round) and the probable arrangement on the Elizabethan stage. The series of ground plan sketches was followed by a plan of property layout on both stages.<sup>8</sup>

The King Lear designs did not spring fully developed from the designer's pen, but were revised over a period of time. A series of sketches labeled "King Lear Stage and Setting for Winthrop Ames" are dated 1917-1919.<sup>9</sup> These sketches show the progression of the designer's ideas concerning the shape of and audience relationship to the acting space, as well as the nature of the setting.

The first sketch shows an eight-sided acting area which is an irregular octagon with five sides thrust into the audience and raised slightly from the auditorium floor level. The setting consists of four pylons of equal dimension (4' x 8' x 18'). In the next sketch the

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<sup>8</sup>File #DR-24, e.-1, Bel Geddes Collection.

<sup>9</sup>File #DR-24, sketches e.-1, Bel Geddes Collection.

acting area is round but still not completely divorced from proscenium architecture. Half the circle is thrust into the audience with the proscenium line bisecting it. Steps, which were such an important part of his later designs of this play and the building that would house it, appeared for the first time as an access to the stage for actors in front of the cyclorama. The pylons doubled in number for this second set and became irregular in shape: two each in heights of 22 feet, 25 feet, 28 feet and 30 feet.

Of significance is Bel Geddes' remark that the steps would stand in front of a cyclorama or dome.<sup>10</sup> The dome over stage was common in Europe but yet untried in the United States. Perhaps he discussed this idea with his friend Robert Edmond Jones, for two years later Jones used the device in his own theatre.

. . . the Provincetown Players installed on the tiny stage of their makeshift theatre near Wahsington Square one of those plaster skydomes, or Kuppel-horizonte with which so many German theatres have replaced the flat canvas of the cyclorama. . . .<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Macgowan, "The New Season: New York Sees Native and European Plays of Real Distinction," Theatre Arts, January 1921, p. 6.



The final sketch in the series is theatre-in-the-round as we know it today. The acting area is completely surrounded by audience and all eight pylons are movable. An information card describes one watercolor rendering of the setting for the throne scene of King Lear.

Massive stone throne on elevation of massive rocks. Three boulders on end as back of throne. Three rocks each side on top of each is a fire illummeting [sic] the scene of crude splendor.<sup>12</sup>

A contemporary theatre text states that a designer creates mood and atmosphere to reinforce important aspects of the play. As an apt example, the Bel Geddes design of King Lear was selected.

The pagan element in King Lear, so strong in the imagery and in Lear's oaths and curses, would be enormously reinforced by the setting, designed by Bel Geddes but never used, of an arc of Stonehenge rocks bursting into flames at the top.<sup>13</sup>

Bruce Bliven was among the theatre commentators who recognized early the depth of Bel Geddes' talents. Bliven defined Bel Geddes' philosophy of theatre in terms of the King Lear designs. His philosophy suggested that

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<sup>12</sup>File #DR-24, e.-1, Bel Geddes Collection.

<sup>13</sup>George R. Kernodle, Invitation to the Theatre (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), p. 425.

every play has a spiritual atmosphere (mood) unique to that play. Every aspect in the production of the play should make an "absolutely unified appeal to the spectator,"<sup>14</sup> in that mood. Bliven noted:

Norman-Bel [sic] Geddes seems to me unusually happy in having the ability, both technical and spiritual, to do what he says ought to be done. His set of designs for King Lear gives some suggestion of the thing I mean.

To Geddes the whole of this play is in a mood of pitiless shadow and tempestuous motion, as though the primary forces of nature were in a state of violent convulsion, maliciously tearing things from their proper places.<sup>15</sup>

Bel Geddes was not the first, Bliven concedes, to feel this atmosphere in King Lear. Others, however, have not produced designs to reflect this mood as well as Bel Geddes. "The common elements used throughout are huge rocks, the ever moving sea and the darkness of the heavens, with a literal absence of grass, foliage, and soft fabrics."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Bruce Bliven, "Norman-Bel [sic] Geddes: His Art and Ideas," Theatre Arts, July 1919, p. 179.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

Initially, Bel Geddes' idea was to stage King Lear in this new "in-the-round" manner in an existing Broadway theatre that would be renovated for the purpose. As the Ames/Bel Geddes discussions progressed the two men began to think in terms of an entirely new theatre building rather than renovation of an existing facility. With the financial resources available to Winthrop Ames at that time, a new building was a realistic consideration. Bel Geddes remembered one discussion in particular.

[Ames]--The more I think about it the more interesting it becomes. It could be a low building. Shouldn't cost an exorbitant amount. Prepare me some preliminary plans and estimates of cost. While you are doing that I will think of plays that could be staged in it. After all, there is no reason why a play taking place in a drawing room can only be understood by an audience seeing it with one of its four walls removed. It should be as understandable from any of the other three sides. Don't you think so?

[Geddes]--Naturally I do.

[Ames]--When did you first think of this idea? [of producing in-the-round]

[Geddes]--When I was working on "Lear" in Beverly Hills.

[Ames]--I see your point. "Lear" might be a good one to start with. Let's look into it.<sup>17</sup>

Significantly, Ames perceived from the beginning the

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<sup>17</sup>File #AE-44, Chapter 40, Bel Geddes Collection. Spelling and punctuation in this quotation have been altered to conform to thesis standards.

possibility of the "in-the-round" arrangement for drawing room dramas as well as King Lear. Later this style of play was utilized to introduce "in-the-round" theatre to American audiences.

The planning stage of King Lear was finished, but discussions for the project were tabled due to Ames' next production which Bel Geddes would design: Clemence Dane's Will Shakespeare. More plays and projects followed this and the two men never resumed their work on King Lear. Bel Geddes commented, "One thing led to another but one of them was not The Round Theatre."<sup>18</sup>

The King Lear design did attract a considerable degree of analysis and attention in the theatre world, especially for an unproduced design. Although the innovative qualities of the King Lear design acted as an introduction for Bel Geddes to potential producers, none was willing to gamble on mounting the play himself.

Bel Geddes' lack of success in securing a producer for his King Lear designs led him to consider producing the show himself. He was searching for the right

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

actor to play the title role. Early in 1926, Holbrook Blinn responded in a wire that he was eager to play Lear when he became free in the autumn. Bel Geddes invited him to New York to talk it over, but no further correspondence between the two men has been found.<sup>19</sup>

Louis Wolheim, whose strength and prominence as an actor was established by his 1922 performance in The Hairy Ape, was another of Bel Geddes' preferences to play Lear. A wire inquiring if Wolheim was interested or available for the title role in a Bel Geddes production of King Lear was sent in June of 1926. Wolheim was spending most of his time in California pursuing a career in motion pictures. He considered the offer for a week and finally returned a negative reply in a letter on June 20, 1926. Apparently he did not want to endanger his movie career with the win or lose situation of a Broadway show. He explained:

. . . even in the event that I should be able to give a good performance of Lear, I am sure that the result would be only a succes d'estime. From a purely personal standpoint I have everything to lose and not much to gain.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>File #DR-24, j.-1, Bel Geddes Collection.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

Wolheim suggested as an alternative that he perform in repertory with King Lear as a unit.

Repertory was not what Bel Geddes had in mind. He thanked Wolheim in a letter and invited him to talk personally when they were next in New York together. They had their talk that summer. Bel Geddes' enthusiasm for the project must have excited Wolheim into reconsidering. On September 1, 1926, Bel Geddes sent Wolheim a revised copy of his adaptation of the script, complete with production notes, for perusal.<sup>21</sup>

Norman Bel Geddes spent the next six months doing legwork on production arrangements. One producer who had desired for some time to ally his name with Bel Geddes was Jed Harris. While Bel Geddes preferred to work alone, he needed the financial contributions Harris could make to their alliance. He sent Harris a complete package containing his production ideas, script adaptation, and model setting.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

On March 22, 1927, Bel Geddes announced in a letter to Wolheim that he had arranged with a manager to produce King Lear in the fall, with Wolheim in the title role. Bel Geddes was always suspicious of a collaborator's integrity, and jealously guarded his original ideas. He asked Wolheim for a commitment to perform in King Lear for Norman Bel Geddes exclusively. He feared he would be excluded from the production once his ideas were completely revealed to a collaborator.<sup>23</sup>

Bel Geddes received a consoling wire on March 29, 1927:

WILL PLAY LEAR UNDER YOUR DIRECTION AND ACCORDING TO  
PLANS AS YOU LAID THEM DOWN LAST SUMMER.

WOLHEIM<sup>24</sup>

However, the following day news came of a more disconcerting nature. Wolheim explained in a letter that the motion picture interests were holding very tightly to their options on him. He was willing and eager to do King Lear but he might not be available for contractual

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

reasons. He also wanted to know who would manage the production.<sup>25</sup>

On April 6, 1927, Bel Geddes told Wolheim the collaborator would be Jed Harris. He also explained his fears concerning the theft of his ideas and designs. Wolheim was requested to keep Bel Geddes informed as to the status of his contractual agreements with the motion picture interests and his availability. No further correspondence between them has been found. Perhaps Wolheim never became available and Bel Geddes never found a suitable actor for the title role of his production.

The Norman Bel Geddes designs for King Lear were never tested with an actual stage production. Some of the ideas, however, were used in other productions. His movable pillars were tried in a production of Julius Caesar by the Players Club of New York, of which Bel Geddes was a member. Reviews suggest the device was successful in the Julius Caesar production.

Norman Bel Geddes manages to stage the houses of both Caesar and Brutus and the forum with one set of movable pillars and a series of marble steps, set before

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid.



a black velvet cyclorama and make them all beautiful.<sup>26</sup>

Having tested the use of movable pylons, Bel Geddes continued his attempts to build a round theatre. In July of 1929, his plans were presented to the Chicago World's Fair Architectural Commission for the construction of a round theatre building which he called "Theatre Number Fourteen." (See Fig. 1.) Bel Geddes' own description of the building is reminiscent of his brainstorming session with Winthrop Ames.

Theatre Number 14 is an intimate theatre with the audience seated in a circle around all sides of the stage. The stage is circular in the center of the building. Separating the stage from the auditorium are steps which form an approach to the stage for actors. Scenery would be restricted to what is commonly termed properties, that is, objects such as furniture. Under the auditorium on the ground floor are the dressing rooms. Scene changes are made in the basement. The scenery is set on two interchanging stages which are raised and lowered. In their elevated position at the auditorium level they form the acting stage. The lowered stage descends into a pit which brings its floor level with the basement floor. The stage slides on tracks. The second stage, already set for the next scene is automatically rolled into position, and raised to the auditorium level, in a few seconds. The auditorium is circular, has no balcony, and is only six rows deep.

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<sup>26</sup>Burns Mantle, "'Julius Caesar' Presented by Players Club at Annual Revival," Syracuse (N.Y.) Post-Standard, 12 June 1927.

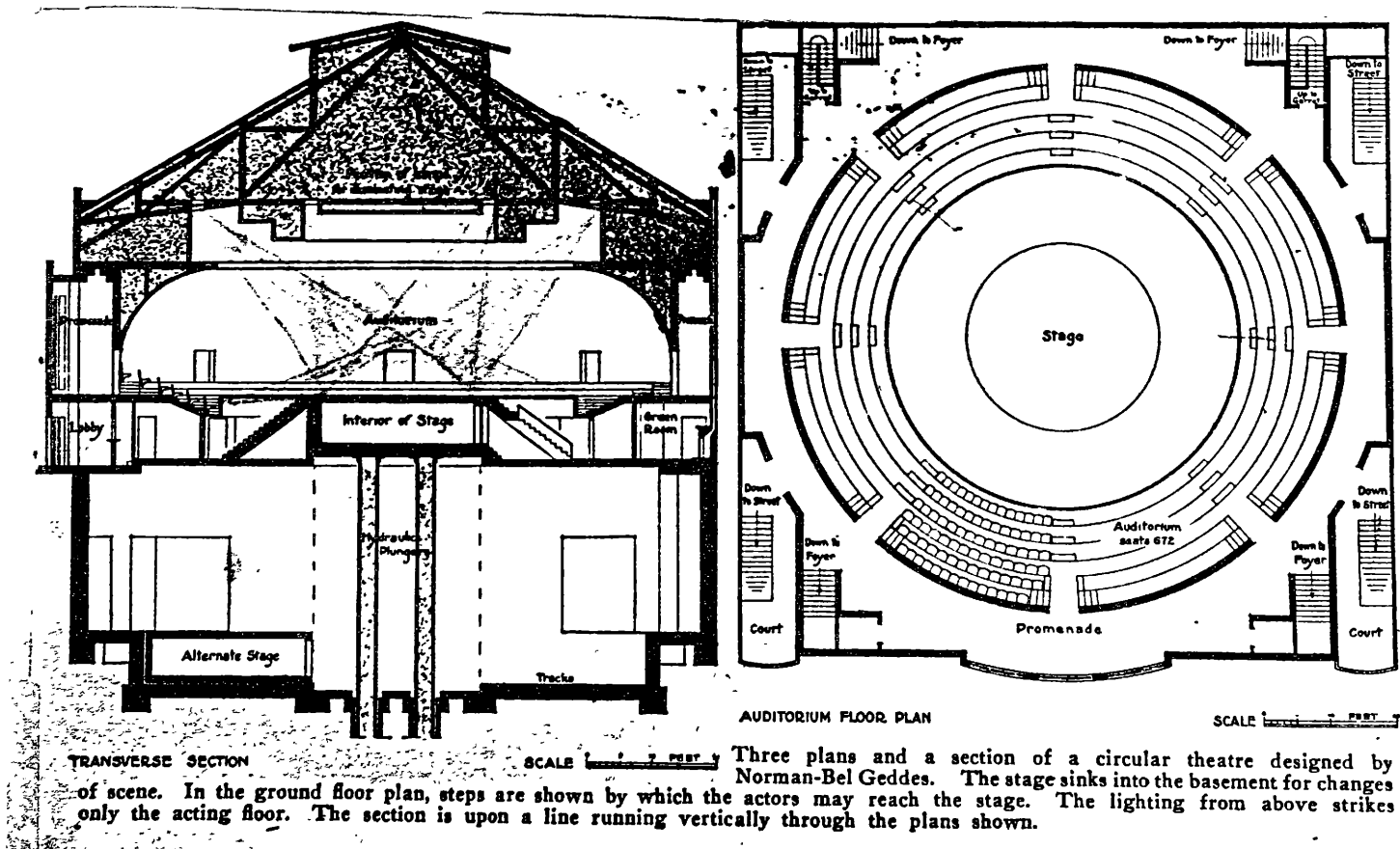


Fig. 1. Ground plan and transverse section for theatre in-the-round.

Each tier of seats is an aisle by reason of the four and one half feet interval between one chair back and the next. By this arrangement each seat has plenty of leg room and commands an excellent view of the entire stage. Because each seat is equally "the best in the house", the revenue from these 800 seats (all at top price) is equal to that from twice the number at the usual sliding scale.

Surrounding the auditorium is a broad promenade, lounge, returning rooms, and outdoor terrace. On the ground floor are the entrance foyer, box offices, manager's office, producer's offices. [sic] Green room, director's office, stage manager's office, stage door entrance, waiting room, and freight elevator entrance. Surrounding the dome that spans both stage and auditorium are two concentric light galleries. All lamps [sic] positions are invisible to the audience. Inside the railing in front of the first row of seats is a circular row of lamps for throwing light upward (as footlights do on a proscenium stage). The overall diameter of the auditorium, including the promenade, is 132 feet, and of the circular stage 30 feet. The longitudinal axis of the theatre is 300 feet. From the stage floor to the peak of the dome above is 65 feet.<sup>27</sup>

The Commission failed to provide the funds for this and other proposed Bel Geddes buildings for the fair.<sup>28</sup> This rejection, however, did not reduce the interest and excitement the designs created on an international level. A feature article in The Bioscope (London) in 1931 stated:

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<sup>27</sup> File #AE-44, Chapter 40, Bel Geddes Collection.

<sup>28</sup> Hunter, Catalog, p. 190.

It will be seen that Mr. Geddes has in each of these varied fields of theatre design broken away from convention with an admirable freshness and vigour. A study of the designs will probably prove stimulating to English architects.<sup>29</sup>

Back in America, the planned Theatre Fourteen drew attention for other reasons as well. In 1928, Claude Bragdon stated in the New York Herald Tribune:

In such a theatre there need be no waste at all . . . Except for the electrician and someone to manipulate the simple scenery and properties appropriate to such a stage, no "crew" would be required--the flymen would take flight, the prop-men would know the pinochle players no more, "lost angels" of a ruined paradise. Doubtless for this very reason the scheme would meet the active opposition of the American Federation of Labor, and as a brother in good and regular standing on Local 829 of the Paperhangers and Scene Painter's Union, I am perhaps getting myself in dutch with my superiors even to suggest such a thing, though on the other hand, as a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, I might possibly score.<sup>30</sup>

Effects of this new concept of dramatic presentation were even felt in the burgeoning educational theatre. In 1932, Glenn Hughes began thinking about theatre-in-the-round at the University of Washington. He felt, as Winthrop Ames had realized fifteen years previously, the

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<sup>29</sup> File #AE-44, Chapter 40, Bel Geddes Collection.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

drawing-room drama lent itself well to this form of staging. He specifically believed comedy, to which he restricted himself in the circular playhouse he built called the Penthouse Theatre, benefitted from in-the-round production. Professor Hughes reasoned this way:

What audiences enjoy in modern comedy is character, story, and dialogue. These three are retained if we move from the proscenium arch stage to the arena. Therefore we will lose nothing vital, and we will gain much. We will gain: (1) novelty of presentation; (2) extreme intimacy between audience and actor; (3) extreme realism of action [ie: eliminating standard theatrical conventions].<sup>31</sup>

On November 4, 1932, the first public performance in modern times of a play in-the-round was presented by Professor Hughes at the University of Washington.<sup>32</sup>

In over three decades of activity in theatre, Norman Bel Geddes saw no major commercial theatre organization staging in-the-round productions on a regular basis. He felt the theatre world was neglecting a vital form of presenting its art. With other entertainment media competing for audience dollars, theatre needs to

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<sup>31</sup>Glenn Hughes, The Penthouse Theatre: Its History and Technique (New York: Samuel French, 1942), p. 10.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

recognize and exploit its assets. The living actor physically centered in an audience is the main asset unduplicated in other forms. Bel Geddes stressed this theme in 1948.

The present day proscenium theatre is the most limiting form of structure the theatre has ever known. The gradual disintegration of the theatre is in direct ratio to lack of change in this restricting form . . . The theatre has characteristics which motion pictures, radio and television lack. It is the only form which can be entirely three-dimensional. Performed on a stage that is not behind a hole in the wall, with an audience on three or all sides of the stage, a play will take on a character which cannot be achieved with a proscenium separating actors from the audience. To re-establish its position as a real flesh-and-blood thing, the theatre must fully exploit this unmatched asset. When it is finally used to bring this characteristic to the fore it will touch the heart and mind to an extent impossible with other mediums . . . Failure to chart such new paths means our theatre will never live up to its ultimate possibilities.<sup>33</sup>

Theatre scholars have never forgotten Bel Geddes' contribution in the area of arena staging. In 1951, Sheldon Cheney wrote to Bel Geddes concerning the revision of Cheney's book The Theatre, Three Thousand Years.

In this connection I am wondering if it will be all right to use as an illustration a drawing of yours (your file number 75) of which you gave me a

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<sup>33</sup> Norman Bel Geddes, "Flexible Theatre," Theatre Arts, June-July 1948, p. 49.

photograph many years ago. This is of a theatre-in-the-round, and it seemed to me just as well to let the younger generation know that you and some other artists were thinking in terms of arena production even at that time.<sup>34</sup>

One of Norman Bel Geddes' first creative ideas when he began his life in the theatre in 1915 was to stage a play--King Lear--in the round. (See Fig. 2.) Although the setting ideas he developed for this form of staging were used elsewhere and contributed to his style on later designs, the building arrangement itself was never realized for any play produced with one of his designs. His ideas and drawings on this subject did stimulate artists to consider this form of staging, to the benefit and betterment of the theatre.

The essential question is not who designed the first arena stage or open stage, but who, through persistent planning, practical demonstration, and continuous experimentation has given us a conception of what the total design for a theatre might be which would accommodate these basic plans. When planning theatres for living stages, Bel Geddes conceived of the building as that space in which the spectator has a clear and close view of the stage and in which the actor and all other theatre artists have the greatest freedom and facility for their expression. It is worthy of note, therefore, that he fostered a complete use of space in the theatre at a time when such a plan was deemed ill-advised, and

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<sup>34</sup>File #CL-23, Bel Geddes Collection.

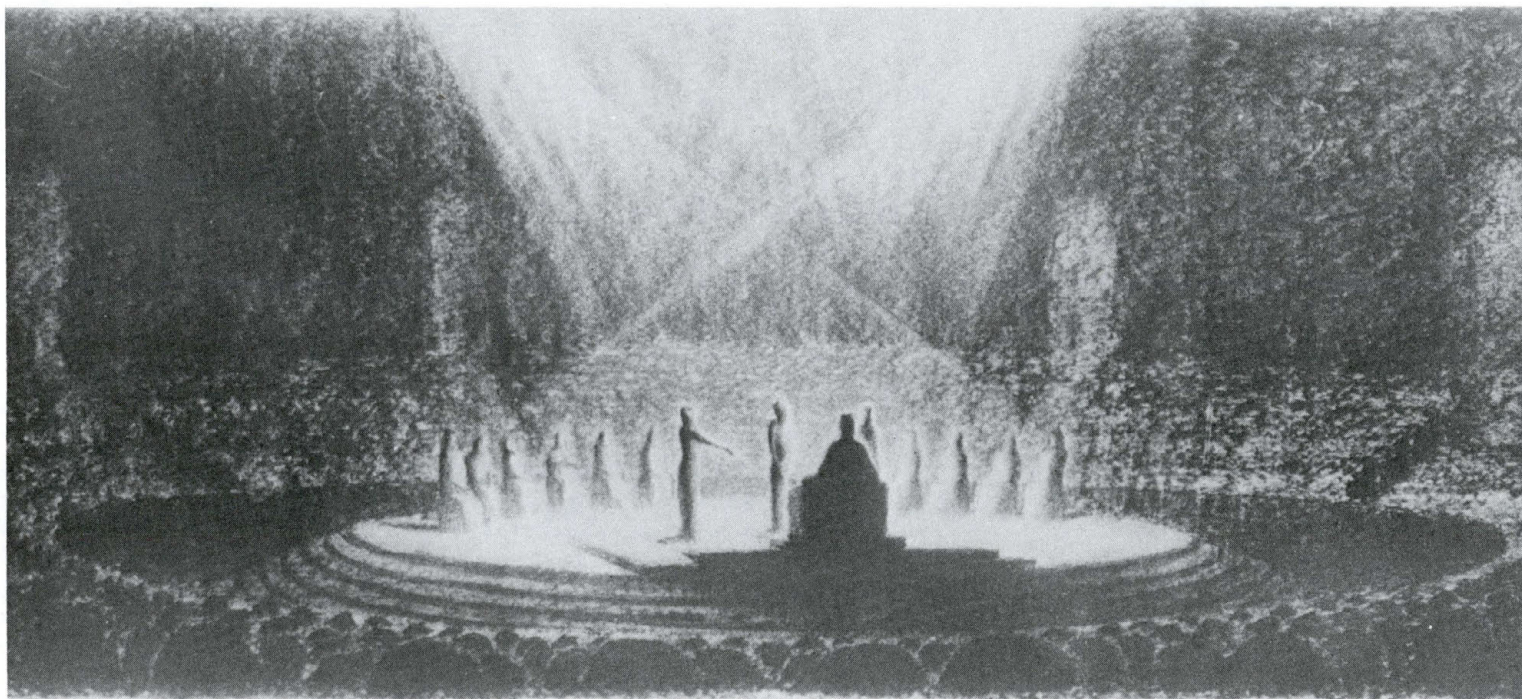


Fig. 2. King Lear: Sketch of auditorium and stage.



also, that his idea did, nevertheless, include a stage and audience space relationship which perhaps is just now beginning to be realized in our more advanced theatres.<sup>35</sup>

Bel Geddes' freedom of thought and unfettered creative ideas stimulated theatre artists and craftsmen to reevaluate the traditional theatre forms in which they work. The sound logic behind his arrangement of actors and audience has only recently been applied in modern theatre. The commercial theatre, always slowest to react, has only tentatively tested Norman Bel Geddes' ideas, which are now over sixty years old. Today's theatre community may well benefit through investigation of an unproduced design and an idea that is seldom credited to its originator.

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<sup>35</sup>Frederick J. Hunter, "Norman Bel Geddes: Theatre Artist," Texas Quarterly, Winter 1962, p. 169.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE DIVINE COMEDY

The American theatre underwent numerous and significant changes while Norman Bel Geddes was serving his apprenticeship as a stage designer. The "new stagecraft" movement, inspired largely by the writings and designs of Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia, was assimilated by American theatre artists who carried it to new heights. On January 16, 1912, Max Reinhardt's Sumurun gave Broadway its first taste of the new stagecraft. This German import was followed by a season of repertory produced by England's Harley Granville-Barker in 1915. The French version of the new stagecraft was revealed in 1917 when Jacques Copeau and his Vieux Colombier company appeared for the first time in New York.<sup>1</sup> America was engaged in a "crash course" about the new stagecraft during the same

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<sup>1</sup>Barnard Hewitt, Theatre U.S.A.: 1665-1957. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1959), p. 321.

period that Norman Bel Geddes was committing himself to a career in the theatre and learning all he could about this new vocation.

The American new stagecraft movement was a response to revolutions in European staging practice. The central tenet in the European movement was the need for "unity of production," meaning that in a theatrical performance all the elements--direction, acting, scenery, costumes, lighting and sound--should exist in harmonious combination to capture the basic mood and idea of the play. Individual theorists dubbed this basic mood "the spine," "the ruling motif," "the sense of atmosphere," or "the dramatic metaphor" of the play.<sup>2</sup> Whatever it was called, this basic mood was the goal scenic designers attempted to achieve on stage.

The British theorist Edward Gordon Craig had the earliest and strongest impact in America. His statements and designs, because of their availability in English, made him Broadway's prime contact with the new

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<sup>2</sup>George E. Bogusch, "Unity in the New Stagecraft: A Study of Productions Designed and Directed by Norman Bel Geddes" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1968), pp. iii-iv.

stagecraft. Craig's Toward a New Theatre was an important source when it was published in London in 1913. It served to school the novices in requirements of the new stagecraft. Craig called for principles of selection, simplification, and above all, unity.<sup>3</sup> Here was an active period of exciting theatre change providing a healthy atmosphere for fresh creative thought. While still formulating his own theatre philosophy, Norman Bel Geddes was thinking in terms of unity. In the September 1915 issue of his magazine InWhich, he wrote, "An artist in setting out to stage a play looks at it in a new way. He sees it as a whole, as a unit, a design, and he tries to hold this unity."<sup>4</sup>

In the five years from 1915 to 1920, Bel Geddes synthesized his theatre philosophy while simultaneously working within the art. His contemporaries in the field of design, Robert Edmond Jones and Lee Simonson, were both Harvard graduates and familiar with new stagecraft through study and their relationship with George Pierce Baker.

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<sup>3</sup>Hewitt, Theatre U.S.A., p. 382.

<sup>4</sup>File #WR-11, n.-1, Bel Geddes Collection.

Bel Geddes did not have the advantage of this educational background, but his belief in the value of this style and his experiments in it were equally impressive.

The King Lear design proposals from 1917-1919 were a precedent for Bel Geddes' most important design. It was during this period he first considered producing a gigantic spectacle. The sketches for King Lear contain the circular design for a stage that would be brought to full development in The Divine Comedy project, perhaps the most monumental single stage setting ever planned.<sup>5</sup>

The visual aspect of theatre and its possible application in the performance of a spectacle or pageant always interested Bel Geddes. For years his mind carried the idea for staging a spectacle of large proportions. He would execute it in the style of his own psychological interpretations of the script, should he find an acceptable one. His promptbook would contain the exact and minute planning necessary to direct each individual participant. This was his dilemma: which was the

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<sup>5</sup>Bogusch, "Unity," pp. 46-47.

appropriate script? He needed "the proper story, script, or historical chronicle of some great event."<sup>6</sup>

The spectacle idea had merit, and even precedent. On May 25, 1916, the New York Shakespeare Tercentenary Committee successfully staged Percy MacKaye's Caliban by the Yellow Sands in the stadium of the College of New York with 2500 citizens in participation. MacKaye directed the pageant himself with the aid of Richard Ordynski, who had stage managed similar projects directed by Max Reinhardt. Robert Edmond Jones designed costumes for the extravaganza. Later Ordynski became a key member of Aline Barnsdall's experimental theatre organization (see p. 24) in California, and Jones spent an entire summer with Bel Geddes designing operas for the Pabst Theatre in Milwaukee. Bel Geddes surely availed himself of the opportunity to discuss with these men the projects on which they had worked. In 1917, the MacKaye pageant was produced again in Harvard's stadium with 5000 Cambridge citizens participating. "The relative success of

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<sup>6</sup>Bernard E. Works, "Norman Bel Geddes, Man of Ideas" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1966), p. 148.

these spectacles convinced Geddes of the validity of his own conceptions."<sup>7</sup>

In 1923, Bel Geddes decided to adapt a script from The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri for use in the culmination of his conceptions regarding a theatre spectacle. The Divine Comedy, he decided, was exactly the proper story for his purposes. He attributed this decision to "an inspiration," but Bernard Works is not convinced the selection was completely random.

. . . it seems more than a coincidence that at the time the literary world was celebrating the six hundredth anniversary of the poet's death. Many students were making pilgrimages to Italy to participate in ceremonies of tribute. At Columbia University, within a few short blocks of his [Bel Geddes'] apartment, an exhibit of Dante's works was on display, supplemented by photographs of the art and architecture of the 13th Century . . . During the summer session special courses were being offered both in Italian and English. The course in English was a study of The Divine Comedy.<sup>8</sup>

Bel Geddes' intention in developing the script was to dramatize the subject in as nearly its own form as possible. He did not intend to create an imitation or translation for the theatre because he realized that an

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 151-52.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 155.

art best expresses an idea in its own terms, rather than those of another art. He was in precise adherence to the doctrine of capturing the basic mood called for in the new stagecraft. In 1923 he wrote:

In undertaking to present The Divine Comedy in the form of the theatre I have made no attempt to be literal. I have tried to find and to hold the essence of Dante's spirit in its broad sense. It is this universal quality that has brought The Divine Comedy through the ages and it is this quality that has inspired me.<sup>9</sup>

Using the Norton translation as a working script, Bel Geddes began by writing a general outline of which incidents would be used. A major portion of the original work would be eliminated by necessity, so the spectacle could be staged in the standard two hours of theatrical presentation. The Inferno would be presented as Act I with The Purgatory and The Paradise both in Act II. Simultaneously, Bel Geddes planned the various parts of the work: writing the script, designing the setting, constructing the models of set and masks, and sketching renderings of costumes and setting.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Norman Bel Geddes, A Project for a Theatrical Presentation of "The Divine Comedy" of Dante Alighieri, Foreword by Max Reinhardt (New York: Theatre Arts, Inc., 1924), p. 10.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.



From the Norton copy he chose seventeen passages to visualize in his play. Bel Geddes knew this spectacle would be of monumental size and would require new and precise methods of organization. His staging manuscript, which would be used to coordinate the various elements in his conception, resembled a musical composer's orchestration. (See Fig. 3.) Bel Geddes described this plan as follows:

My group divisions were: first the spoken word; second, the lighting; third, the movement of the principals; then the movement of the subordinates or chorus; followed by the voices of the subordinates; and lastly music. These major groupings are sub-divided into minor groups which in turn divide into separate instruments of expression. The groups as my score now shows them are listed from the top to the bottom of a page. Each page represents one minute's time and is divided into quarters so that everything is considered in units of every fifteen seconds throughout the performance. By reading a page from left to right the synchronization of each element with every other element at any specific moment is clearly defined.<sup>11</sup>

The penchant for extremely meticulous organization was a Bel Geddes trademark throughout his career.<sup>12</sup> This

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>12</sup>Eldon Mecham suggests in his M.F.A. thesis that this trademark was a result of bitter past lessons. In his youth Bel Geddes appeared in vaudeville as "Bob Blake--Excentric Comedian." His premiere performance was a

pre-planning is indicative of the considerable thought the artist applied to his creation. His plans and notes provide a welcome source of material for study purposes, but they exist for no other reason than the necessity for organization in a project of this dimension.

In all, the production would utilize about a thousand performers, which vests it with the numerical proportions of a pageant. Bel Geddes' planned production manuscript would direct and control these performers and their movements. His production staff could easily determine the designer's exact intention with regard to each element of the production.<sup>13</sup> This system enabled Bel Geddes to obey the prime canon of new stagecraft--unity.

Thus the director can see at a glance down the page just what words accompany what action, what movement

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disastrous flop as a result of the pianist's confusion concerning his music cues. Mecham contends that memories of this event "prompted Bel Geddes later in his career, to be extremely meticulous in writing out the details of every phase of a production." Eldon J. Mecham, "Norman Bel Geddes: Artistic Lighting Designer," (M.F.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1966), p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Frederick J. Hunter, "Norman Bel Geddes' Conception of Dante's Divine Comedy," Educational Theatre Journal 18 (October 1966): 240.

Time	First Quarter Minute	Second Quarter Minute	Third Quarter Minute	Fourth Quarter Minute
	21 Minute			
Lighting	Very gradually the pit light brightens.			
Movement of Principals	Dante and Virgil pause. Their eyes have not left the sight in front of them.	Dante's hands go to his eyes. His face is set with awe.	(R Z 45)	
Movement of Chorus	As the forms on the lower slope fall back, those from the upper slope have moved around either side and underneath them. (Group 2140 at L, J, K, L, 18, 19. Group 2430 at R, U, V, 25, 26.)	Part of the inside line of forms start to rise toward a vertical position as though to draw away from the heat. The retiring movement continues. (Group 2410 at R, Q, P, 22, 21.)	More forms rise toward a vertical position.	The remainder of the forms begin to rise. Those that started to rise first have reached an erect position.
Voice of Principals	Silence			
Voice of Chorus	The faint hum is distinguishable as coming from a multitude of voices incased within thick walls. The fifth group comes in.	The voices are slightly louder but remain individually indistinguishable. The sixth group comes in.	Variety of tone comes into the voices. One group becomes high: another low: some hoarse: some shrill. The voices are monotonous and do not get loud but always sound far below.	More variety in the mass of voices--mad howls--agonized screams--exclamations of anger--cries of pain--sighs--sobs--each by a different group.
Music	Sounds of massive objects grinding against one another.	A throbbing rhythm of one beat every third second dominates all sounds.		

Fig. 3. One page of The Divine Comedy prompt script representing the action in sixty seconds of time.

of the chorus, what arrangement of sound, and of light. In this way, the essential unity\* of the piece is established in advance, with a minimum of guesswork and confusion left to rehearsal.<sup>14</sup>

Bel Geddes' attempt to hold the essence and spirit of the piece can be seen in the changes he made as a playwright. All the images were abstract. The leopard, the lion and the she-wolf became three awesome beasts without individual identities. Dr. Frederick S. Hunter agrees with the value of this shift from particular to general images for the sake of a theatrical expression of the whole. He states that the theatre ". . . must constantly resort to such abstractions in order to achieve a necessary level of familiar knowledge."<sup>15</sup> Bel Geddes' other changes included the omission of the familiar figures of Paolo and Francesca, and shifting the invocation of Canto II to the beginning of the play. All the changes, whether to eliminate long dialogues, as in the former example, or to transfer Dante's personal thought

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\*Italics mine.

<sup>14</sup>R. Dana Skinner, "The Geddes Project for The Divine Comedy," The Commonweal, 28 July 1926, p. 308.

<sup>15</sup>Hunter, "Bel Geddes' Conception," p. 241.

into dialogue, as in the latter, were part of the process of translating a narrative poem into a theatrical production in which "spectacle would be the chief source of meaning."<sup>16</sup>

If spectacle was the goal of this adaptation, the physical production location was an important consideration. No existing theatre building was adequate to mount such a pageant. The conventional proscenium stage house would only limit the vision of the designer. The location of the stage was flexible. The stage could be erected for a performance out-of-doors, or some large structure could accommodate an indoor production. The indoor location would necessarily have to be an armory or large structure such as Madison Square Garden or the Chicago Coliseum. The construction of the stage could either be permanent or portable. However, the size of this production would not qualify even the portable construction as a "road show."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Bel Geddes, Project, p. 14.

The stage setting resembles a gently curving hillside rising away from the audience, with a pit in the center. The hillside is covered with steps and platforms creating an almost infinite number of acting areas. The steps rise from one side of the lip of a funnel-shaped crater. A pair of enormous towers rise at the back of the stage without any recognizable shape. The entire stage and crater is surrounded by a short wall. The audience sits in a semicircle facing the stage just as audiences faced the orchestra in a Greek theatre.<sup>18</sup>

This space stage was the only setting used for the production. Changes of scene would be created by lighting changes and movement of the costumed extras. Control of light was an integral part of the design. It had artistic importance in the production as called for in the philosophy of Adolphe Appia. Appia saw the vast aesthetic possibilities of light in the theatre and wrote:

Light is to the production what music is to the score: the expressive element in opposition to the literal signs; and, like music, light can

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

express only what belongs to the inner essence of all vision's vision.<sup>19</sup>

From the beginning to the end of each performance the lighting would vary in some way. The light source or direction changes to separate the three main divisions of the drama. (See Fig. 4.) During the Inferno sequences all the lighting comes from within the pit. The Purgatory scene is illuminated from the rear, creating silhouettes.

As the performance goes on the source of illumination rises until finally it is overhead. The light comes from all sides, flattening all relief and eliminating shadows to give a feeling as thin, filmy, and as much that of unending space as possible. When actually realized it should be like looking into millions of stars on a clear night only it should not be night. At the very end, when the light reaches an apparent maximum intensity, Dante exclaims: O abundant Grace, by the Eternal Light, let my sight be consumed! Simultaneously the light is directed into the audience, dazzling them for the instant. Then total darkness. Gradually a soft glow returns over the auditorium. The place where the stage was is a dark void. This is the end.<sup>20</sup>

Bel Geddes often defined costumes as scenery worn by actors. He used this idea to advantage in The Divine

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<sup>19</sup> Edwin Wilson, The Theater Experience (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1976), pp. 250-51.

<sup>20</sup> Bel Geddes, Project, pp. 19-20.





Fig. 4. The Divine Comedy: Light from above. Photograph of model setting shows effects of overhead light source, to be used immediately preceding "Paradise" scene.



Comedy. Five hundred extras would be used to compose scenery (see Fig. 5) as crowds or, standing on the levels and steps, they could create movement on the stage. Costumed actors standing on different levels of the giant plinths at the rear of the stage could create the appearance of the angels who guard Purgatory. There are twenty-five units to the wing shape on each tower and they would have the capability to open and spread like a giant bird. (See Fig. 4 & 6.)<sup>21</sup>

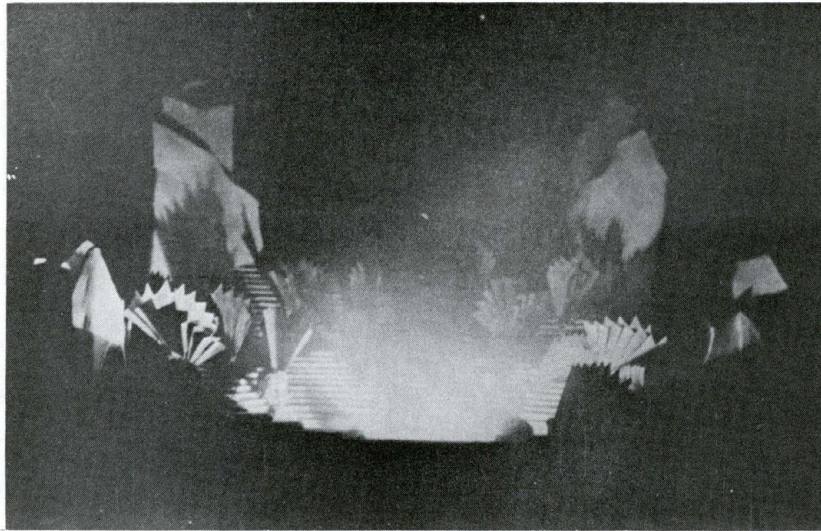
Another distinct costume form is a great serpent made up of eight men crawling one after another, and covered with a single slimy looking garment. And there are giant objects who sprout telescopic wings like bats, that open and close at will. The wings are worn on either side of the kneeling actor, concealing his body. His head is concealed with a mask.<sup>22</sup>

Dante, Virgil, and Beatrice are masked, serving the dual purpose of projecting facial expressions into the large audience area and allowing for a megaphone device to be carried before the actors mouth for voice projection. Although dialogue was limited, this sound and all other sound was given importance in the production.

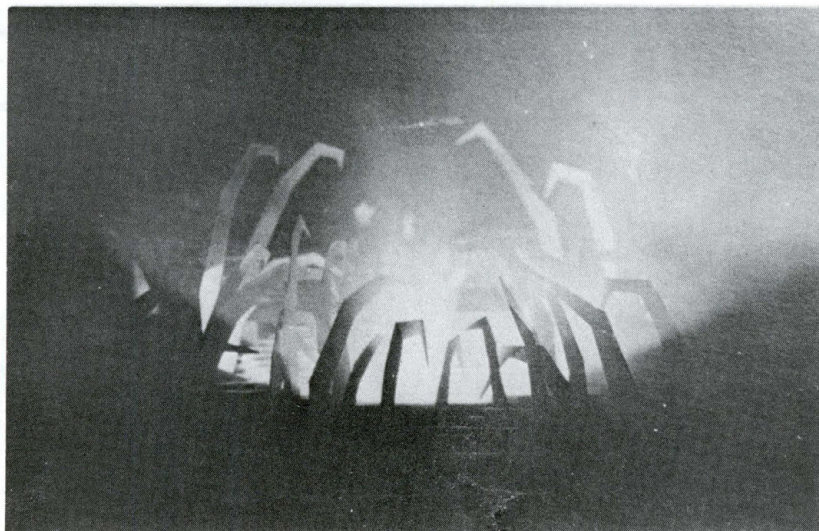
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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., Plate 22.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 18.



Winged Harpies scourge the crowd.



Earth forms opening. Like fingers on a hand they open to reveal the bowels of the earth. As though wilting from the great heat the forms droop, crumble and collapse into the chasm.

Fig. 5. The Divine Comedy: Two photographs of model costumes. Shown with possible lighting techniques on model setting.





Fig. 6. Watercolor rendering of Two Winged Guardians.

Bel Geddes considered all sound other than the spoken word to be under the heading of music. Music would be handled much the same as the lighting. It moves and changes from the start of the play toward the full celestial chorus at the close. Music received the same detailed planning as other technical elements of the production. Much of the understage area was to be used to house three vibrating chambers which would magnify and/or alter any sound from any source. Tubes from these chambers were to carry the sound to nine different parts of the auditorium where shutters finally control the volume. Of course, the nature of the sound moving through passageways would be extraordinary. Although a full symphony orchestra would be used, many new instruments creating revolutionary sounds had to be invented by the designer. Bel Geddes required new qualities of sound.

. . . no blatant bursts of anything that resembles earthly music, for here is a drama of unearthly emotions. I do not want to hear a trumpet, a violin, a flute, a drum, as such. Something must be worked out so that we do not recognize an instrument but feel a vibration that reaches a din, that reaches a tone, exquisite and terrible, but, above all, not

common. Surely in this music there must be a quality not of the outer earth.<sup>23</sup>

The entire Divine Comedy design--stage, costume, mask, light and sound--was completely planned and ready for production. Bel Geddes displayed this fruit of over two years of intense work to potential producers and other members of the theatrical community. Comments by his contemporaries were more than just favorable. Sheldon Cheney cited The Divine Comedy production concept as one of the more imaginative things to arrive on the American theatrical scene.

. . . of the very numerous and varied plays that have come to the attention of American theatre-goers this season, there is none that rivals in value the unproduced production of Dante's "Divine Comedy" as devised by Norman-Bel [sic] Geddes.<sup>24</sup>

The comparison of Bel Geddes' design to international designers of the new stagecraft was made by critic Stark Young when Bel Geddes' design appeared at the

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 15-16.

<sup>24</sup>Sheldon Cheney, "The Divine Comedy: Drawings for a Dramatic Production by Norman-Bel [sic] Geddes," The Century Magazine, April 1922, p. 861.

international theatre exposition at Steinway Hall in 1926.

The most profound and significant design in the whole exhibition in Norman-Bel [sic] Geddes' Dante Model, with its scope and originality, its intense gradations, its magnificent and subtle variety, its soaring ascents and descents, its really grandiose emotion.<sup>25</sup>

Fellow designer Lee Simonson applauded Bel Geddes' production concept as an internationally exceptional idea. When German scenic artists stopped to study the Divine Comedy design at the International Exhibition of theatre design in Amsterdam, Simonson remarked:

. . . it is precisely the Germans who had better stop and look for fifteen minutes for with all their Festspielhaus and Gross Schauspielhaus they have yet to show a single project that touches Geddes' Divina Comedia in creative imagination, Reinhardt's Danton is a mere circus in comparison.<sup>26</sup>

What Bel Geddes' had provided was not only an exceptional design, but an exceptional American design, which incorporated the best of the new stagecraft, and in the opinion of his American contemporaries surpassed the efforts

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<sup>25</sup>Stark Young, "The International Theatre Exposition," The New Republic, 17 March 1926, p. 103.

<sup>26</sup>Lee Simonson, "Apologizing for America," Theatre Arts, July 1922, p. 227.

of European designers. Sheldon Cheney wrote:

. . . It is one more indication . . . that America is outgrowing its dependence upon Europe for what is imaginative, progressive, and inspiring in the theater.<sup>27</sup>

Critical acclaim is one thing and mounting a production is quite another. In May of 1921, Norman Bel Geddes began the long process of selling his design to a producer. He wrote to the Dante League asking for permission to show them his plans. They represented logical consumers for a pageant on the subject of Dante and especially, as has already been noted, during this tercentenary period. Bel Geddes was graciously thanked and then thrown to the lions of the bureaucratic system. A reply referred him to James Byrne of the Italy America Society and chairman of the Dante Committee. The National Dante Committee further referred him to H. J. Burchell who was chairman of the sub-committee on Pageants and Music. The buck stopped with Burchell, who told Bel Geddes that funds allocated for a dramatic text had already been expended but, "If there is any way in which the National Dante Committee can be of service to you other than

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<sup>27</sup>Cheney, "Divine Comedy," p. 868.

financially, we shall be very glad to connect with you."<sup>28</sup>

Bel Geddes decided to ask his friend and previous patron Otto Kahn to assume financial responsibility for the production. In a letter on November 13, 1921 the designer explained the proposed production to the banker. Bel Geddes told Kahn that Walter Littlefield, who was the foremost Dante authority in the United States, had read the script and seen the proposal and was very excited. Two leading New York producers were also enthusiastic over the project; Winthrop Ames and Arthur Hopkins (who was interested in producing the spectacle). Although Bel Geddes was no businessman, he had done research into this aspect of the venture as well. He explained that he estimated the production costs at around \$50,000 excluding rental on the building, or stadium in the event of an outdoor production. Fifty thousand tickets would need to be sold to cover production expenses. Bel Geddes observed that the Italian population of New York was 700,000. As this production would particularly appeal

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<sup>28</sup> File #DS-1, j.-1, Bel Geddes Collection.



to them, success was insured. On November 15, 1921, Otto Kahn answered.

Your plan is a most interesting and sympathetic one, from your description and the attached reproductions of your drawings, I am entirely assured that its realization would be an artistic event of the first rank. But I am so overwhelmed with demands and commitments as to my time and energies, and my available funds are so heavily reduced by taxation that, much to my regret, I do not see my way to take the lead in this matter, financially or otherwise. I hope that you, with the weighty assistance of Dr. Finley, may succeed in getting the Dante Committee or the Italo-America Society to undertake the sponsorship for the proposition, and if so, I should be quite prepared to cooperate to such modest extent as my present situation permits.<sup>29</sup>

One week later Dr. Finley backed out. He told Bel Geddes in a letter that he refused to take on any more than the Dante Committee program was already doing.<sup>30</sup>

At least two musical composers were contacted in reference to a score for the proposed production. In April of 1923, a letter to Arthur Farwell stated that talks must end on music for the production as Bel Geddes was still awaiting commitment from a producer. Considerable correspondence exists between Roger Sessions and

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Bel Geddes in the years of 1924-26, but a personal note in 1925 indicates Bel Geddes had given up all hope for production of his design. Hope was certainly gone by 1928. On April 2 of that year Bel Geddes wrote in response to an inquiry from Mrs. Heloise Durant Rose that there was a general lack of interest in the project.

Unquestionably it will be done some day, but having spent a great deal in recreating in terms of the theatre (to whatever degree I have succeeded) the great spirit of Dante's poem, and being perfectly willing to go on and finish the job, it seems to me that it is up to other people to show sufficient interest to make that possible.<sup>31</sup>

Norman Bel Geddes concluded with the profound statement that he was an artist, not a promoter.

This was not his final attempt to influence an organization to produce his design. The Chicago World's Fair commissioned Bel Geddes to design the theatre buildings for their fair. His designs included several previously unproduced ideas. He designed an "Intimate Theatre" called Theatre Number Fourteen that would have been the first theatre-in-the-round in the United States (see Chapter II: King Lear). Also he designed a

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

building called "Theatre Number One Forty-Seven" which was to be The Divine Comedy theatre. (See Fig. 7 & 8.) It would be built for the purpose of adequately housing the Bel Geddes stage design for The Divine Comedy which he had convinced the committee they should produce.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, none of these or any of his designs for the fair were produced. In a letter to Fortune magazine, Rufus Dawes, president of the Chicago World's Fair, said of Bel Geddes:

None of his designs were used, but they were not superceded by other designs. There was insufficient money to proceed with any theatre and restaurant buildings. This was 1929--the crash.<sup>33</sup>

The Divine Comedy project continued to generate attention after the final refusal by the World's Fair committee. In 1932, fellow designer Lee Simonson reflected:

. . . Adolphe Appia's theory of the theatre has found no more complete realization than in the work of Norman Bel Geddes whose monumental project for a

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<sup>32</sup>"Geddes's 'Dante' for World's Fair," New York Evening Post, 16 November 1929, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup>File #AE-44, Chapter 40, Bel Geddes Collection.

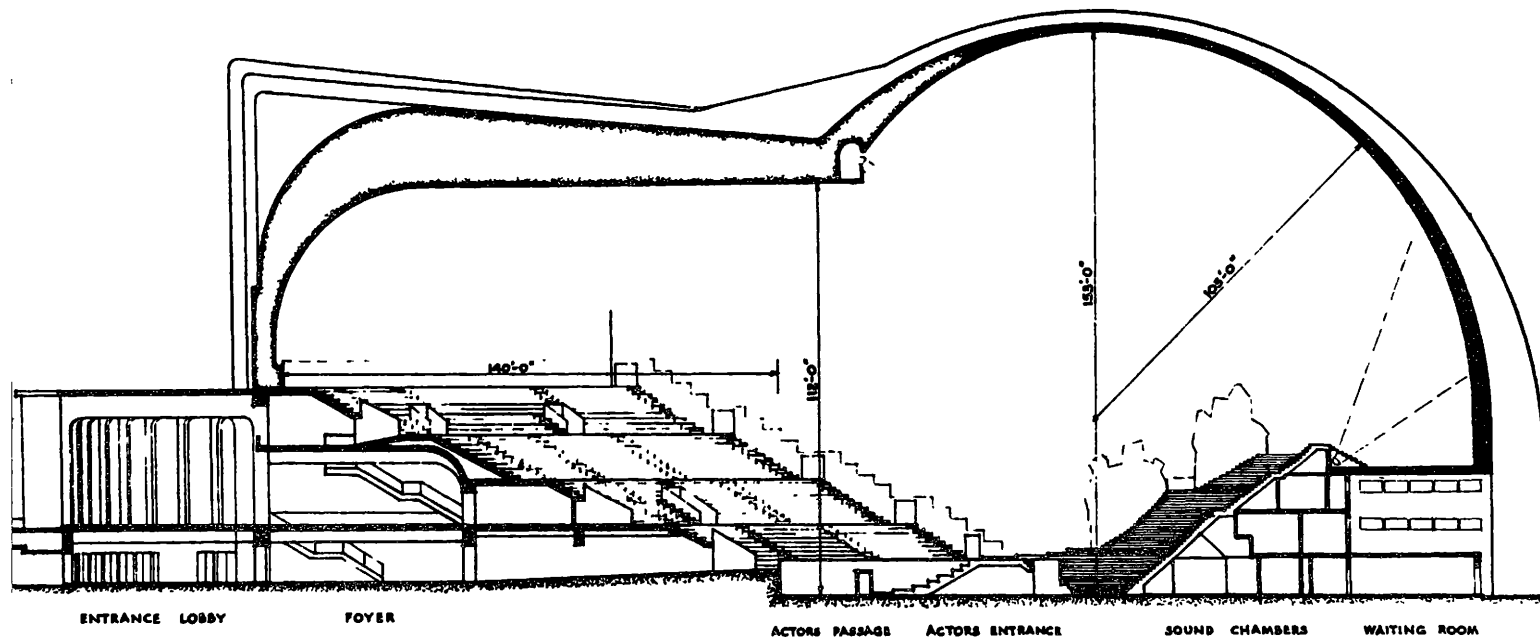


Fig. 7. Elevation of The Divine Comedy theatre cross section.

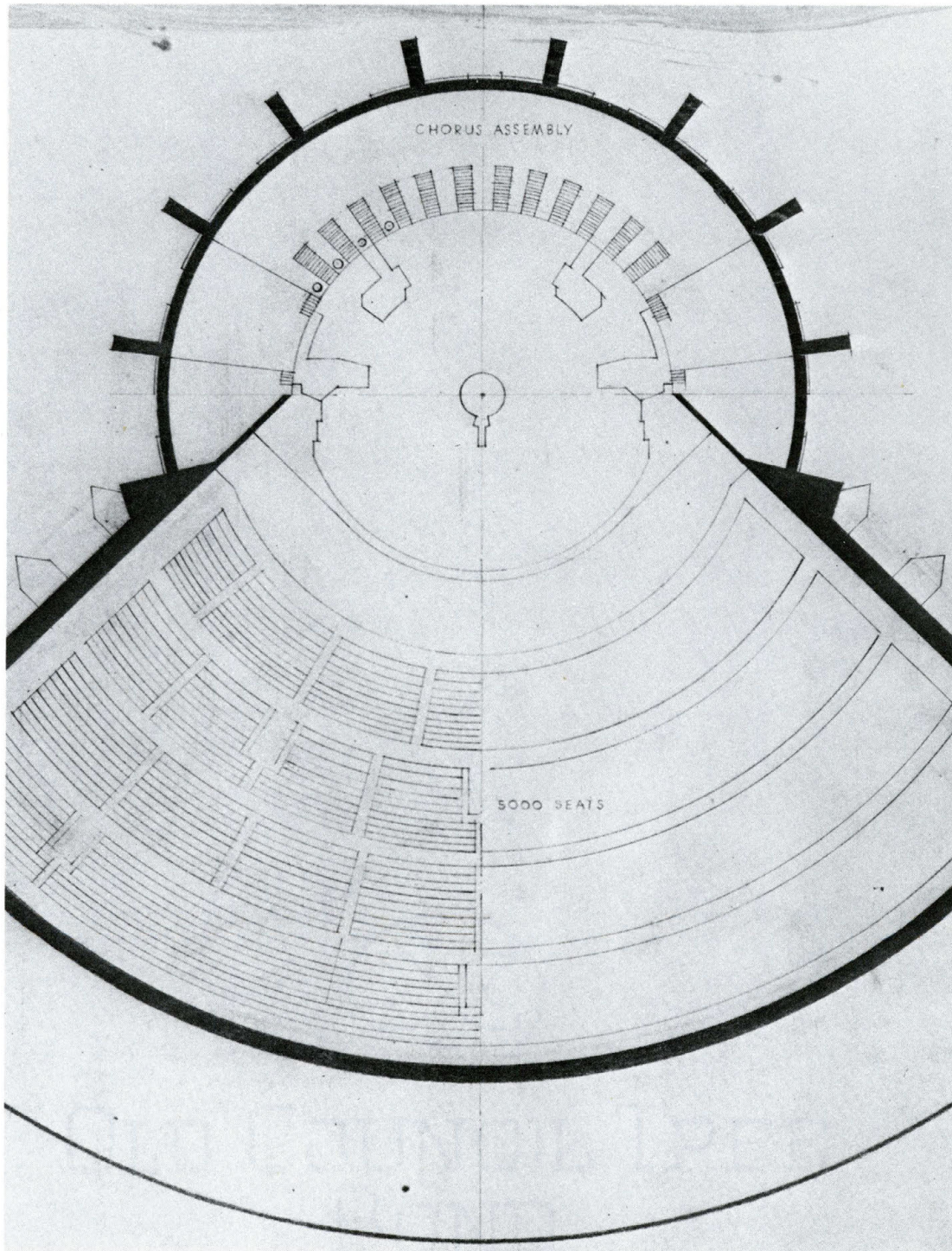


Fig. 8. Elevation of The Divine Comedy theatre groundplan.

production of Dante's classic poem is a distinguished contribution to American theatre art.<sup>34</sup>

The project served to attract the attention of Max Reinhardt when he was looking for an artist to visualize his spectacle The Miracle in America.<sup>35</sup> So impressed was Reinhardt with Bel Geddes' talent that the great German master wrote the foreward to Bel Geddes' first book, a description of The Divine Comedy project. Reinhardt concluded, "Blessed by sun and rain he [Bel Geddes] will mature as the strongest man in the theatre of this time."<sup>36</sup>

The Divine Comedy and The Miracle (designed for Reinhardt) are two designs that brought Norman Bel Geddes more fame and respect as a first-rate designer than any others. The Divine Comedy remains unproduced to this day. With each technical advance in the theatre arts the

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<sup>34</sup>Lee Simonson, "Appia's Contribution to the Modern Stage," Theatre Arts, August 1932, p. 633.

<sup>35</sup>Kenneth Macgowan, "The Miracle--A Collaboration," Theatre Arts, March 1924, p. 175.

<sup>36</sup>Max Reinhardt, Foreword to A Project for a Theatrical Presentation of "The Divine Comedy" of Dante Alighieri, by Norman Bel Geddes (New York: Theatre Arts, Inc., 1924), p. 6.

feasibility of mounting the production increases: great strides in lighting control have been made which would make many of the special effects function easily; electronic synthesizer music would satisfy the musical requirements of Bel Geddes even beyond his wildest dreams; and plastics and synthetic fabrics make his costume ideas possible. In all, the Bel Geddes design still generates excitement.

For Bel Geddes, the design was an experiment with his own untried ideas. It was the first appearance of his unique "arrow-shaped" steps (concentric steps with right-angle jogs that resemble architectural set-backs), which he used again and again in his later designs.<sup>37</sup>

(See Chapter IV: Lazarus Laughed.) Steps that created acting levels became one of the few identifiable trademarks of a Bel Geddes design.

In 1921, Kenneth Macgowan lamented the slow progress theatre was making at that time towards a break with ancient traditions and the "peep show" proscenium stage. In Theatre Arts he called for, "a theatre for the

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<sup>37</sup>Bogusch, "Unity," p. 47.

drama that grows tired of the limitations of realism."<sup>38</sup>  
 While he wrote these words, Bel Geddes was designing a play and a theatre that forty-five years later would be called "the very trademark of the new age" in theatre.<sup>39</sup>

Although never produced, the design for The Divine Comedy is discussed by students and scholars as if it had once existed. After over fifty years the design is exciting and stimulating. It is listed as one of the greatest accomplishments of creative scenic art. Mordecai Gorelik stated, "The grandeur of this conception remains unequaled in the American theatre; it is unfortunate that it has never been put into execution."<sup>40</sup> The remarks of Stark Young made at the time the model was first exhibited express the power of the design.

And about the whole form of the model there is something that I feel as I look at it; the whole thing as it stands there appears to be waiting. It appears to wait for what will reveal it, for light

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<sup>38</sup>Kenneth Macgowan, "The Next Theatre," Theatre Arts, October 1921, p. 300.

<sup>39</sup>Kernodle, Invitation, p. 422.

<sup>40</sup>Mordecai Gorelik, New Theatres for Old (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1962), p. 308.



. . . And when you look at it, it darkens in the imagination and stirs you, seeming to rise out of the tragic substance and shadow of the earth.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Stark Young, "The Mould of Form: The Theatre of The Divine Comedy," The New Republic, 3 January 1923, pp. 148-49.

## CHAPTER IV

### LAZARUS LAUGHED

American playwrights and scene designers escaped the bonds of strict realism during the 1920's through a greater freedom in play structure and new experiments in production techniques. Eugene O'Neill and designer Robert Edmond Jones opened the way with The Emperor Jones, The Hairy Ape, and Desire Under the Elms. In The Great God Brown, O'Neill borrowed a device from Greek drama and "dramatized the duel nature of personalities, using for most characters a mask as well as the normal face."<sup>1</sup>

Critics gave The Great God Brown a lukewarm reception. They were confused by the mask device and perplexed by the obscure meaning of the play, but lauded its eloquence and imagination. Brooks Atkinson recognized

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Macgowan and William Melnitz, The Living Stage (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1955), p. 487.

the significance of this experimental O'Neill production.

What Mr. O'Neill has succeeded in doing in The Great God Brown . . . is obviously more important than what he has not succeeded in doing. He has not made himself clear. But he has placed within the reach of the stage finer shades of beauty, more delicate nuances of truth and more passionate qualities of emotion than we can discover in any other single modern play.<sup>2</sup>

Some critics were more than a little bothered by the masks.

Alexander Woollcott was not inclined to weigh the balance in favor of O'Neill and, though he credited the play with being "now and again poetic in its divination and almost always sturdy with the characteristic fibre of a playwright who has a lonesome, hardy, pathfinding mind," he found "the mask trick" tiresome and overdone and the play as a whole uneven to the point of being "precipitous."<sup>3</sup>

O'Neill was concerned about the results of his "mask experiment" and continually questioned himself and his associates about their usefulness and effectiveness. Kenneth Macgowan, director of the Greenwich Village Theatre production, said of the masks, "They only get across personal resemblance of a blurry meaninglessness.

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<sup>2</sup>"Symbolism in an O'Neill Tragedy," New York Times, 25 January 1926, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup>Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), p. 593.

. . . Perhaps the result the script calls for is impossible to attain by the method of combination masks the script describes."<sup>4</sup>

O'Neill blamed a lack of time and money for experimentation with the masks for some of their shortcomings. For these and other reasons O'Neill concluded the masks in The Great God Brown "weren't right."

They became an unnecessary trick, . . . Perhaps I was demanding too much, and it can't be done--but I'm sure with the right masks my meaning would get across, that the play would be mystic instead of confusing--and I'm sure, given the money and time, the right masks could have been made.<sup>5</sup>

Undaunted, O'Neill called for masked actors in his next play one year later. Lazarus Laughed, a further experiment in unconventional theatre forms, was given the subtitle A Play for an Imaginative Theatre, which described it well. The staging required extensive use of masks and seven different setting locations that spanned the globe from Bethany to Rome, to Athens. Here, indeed, was a formidable script to challenge any company and especially a designer.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 594.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

In 1926, a group of Chicago's prominent wealthy citizens formed a producing company hoping to extend first-rate professional theatre from Broadway to the Midwest. The Chicago Play Producing Company (CPPC), led by board president Arthur Bissell, selected Marian Gering, who had worked in the Meyerhold Theater in Moscow, to direct their productions. Kenneth Macgowan, successful producer and director from New York, was named advisory director. The CPPC decided to present Lazarus Laughed early in 1927 in a professional production rivaling the best New York offerings. The O'Neill drama would be mounted at the Goodman Memorial Theatre, co-produced by Thomas Wood Stevens (director at the Goodman) and Kenneth Macgowan. Norman Bel Geddes was selected to design all technical aspects of the production. The entire project promised to be exciting for the Chicago group. Lazarus Laughed would be the first O'Neill premiere outside Greenwich Village.<sup>6</sup>

Lazarus Laughed assumed the trappings of a typical Bel Geddes production at an early date. Bel Geddes

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<sup>6</sup>File #DR-25, i.-1, Bel Geddes Collection.

did everything on a large scale. It was announced that after the principal players were cast in New York, 200 extras would be hired in Chicago to fill out the company. The setting, masks, and costumes, designed by Bel Geddes, were revolutionary, monumental, and in some instances, mammoth.<sup>7</sup>

The practice of using a separate artist to design scenic and other technical aspects was a new idea in America at this time. Today, while the practice of engaging a separate artist (or artists) for technical design purposes is common, defining the designer's duties is difficult. Parker and Smith offer this definition:

The esthetic responsibility of the total visual effect is normally in the hands of the scene designer. . . . As a collaborating artist the scene designer should make an important visual contribution to the dramatic form. Through his study of dramatic structure and perception of the playwright's goals he is better able to find the author's image and bring a visual interpretation of the theme onto the stage.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> W. Oren Parker and Harvey K. Smith, Scene Design and Stage Lighting, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1974), pp. 16-17.

Playwrights provide the designer with varying degrees of instruction. Some leave decisions regarding setting location and organization of space to the director or designer, allowing latitude in their concept of the play. Others, and O'Neill in some instances, attempt to influence various elements of the play through stage directions to a much greater degree.

The playwright may have such clear ideas of every detail of the production that planning the production can be limited to carrying out the directions written into the script. The verbal descriptions of the settings may be so meticulous that they leave no feasible alternative approach to the scene designer. . . . The plays by George Kelly and some by Eugene O'Neill are notable in this respect.<sup>9</sup>

O'Neill was not as specific in Lazarus Laughed concerning scenery as he was in other plays, but he had some firm ideas which he expressed at the beginning of the script.

SCENE: Exterior and interior of LAZARUS' home at Bethany. The main room at the front end of the house is shown--a long, low-ceilinged, sparsely furnished chamber, with white walls gray in the fading daylight that enters from three small windows at the left. To

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<sup>9</sup> Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole, Scenery for the Theatre: The Organization, Processes, Materials, and Techniques Used to Set the Stage (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), p. 31.

the left of center several long tables placed lengthwise to the width of the room around which many chairs for guests have been placed. In the rear wall, right, a door leading into the rest of the house. On the left, a doorway opening on a road where a crowd of men has gathered. On the right, another doorway leading to the rear where there is a crowd of women.<sup>10</sup>

This is the first of eight different settings, both interior and exterior in location, in which O'Neill sets the action of his play. Bel Geddes wanted to "find the author's image and bring a visual interpretation of the theme onto the stage."<sup>11</sup> However, he did not feel obligated to copy the setting descriptions offered in the script. A theory shared by Appia and Craig, that "A simple setting emphasizes the actor and therefore the play,"<sup>12</sup> influenced the Bel Geddes design philosophy and led him toward a simplification of means and effect. In 1915, when he was only beginning to theorize about design, he wrote, "An artist in setting out to stage a play looks

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<sup>10</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Lazarus Laughed: A Play for an Imaginative Theatre (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1927), p. 12.

<sup>11</sup>Parker and Smith, Scene Design, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup>Macgowan and Melnitz, The Living Stage, p. 442.



at it in a new way. He sees it as a whole, as a unit, a design, and he tries to hold this unity."<sup>13</sup>

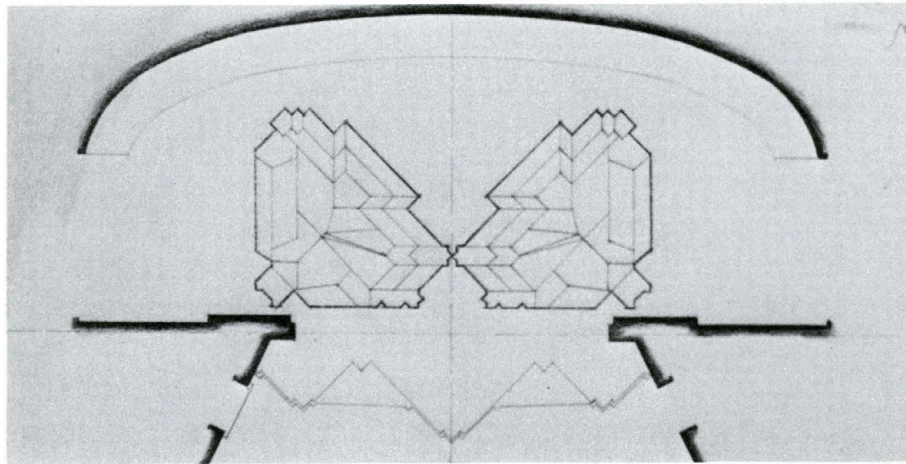
Bel Geddes desired to design the show so that diverse setting locations could be changed quickly on stage; perhaps, as he had done before, in full view of the audience. To accomplish this he designed Lazarus Laughed as a unit set. Bel Geddes' idea utilized this theatrical device to unify the production and simplify the numerous scene changes as well. The unit set would retain and reuse elements of scenery to simulate a change of scene. The design shapes, for example, were varied in each setting, although placed in identical floor plans, or the same shape was moved to a variety of positions.<sup>14</sup> (See Figs. 9, 10, & 11.)

The set consisted of two giant motorized wagons in the general shape of isocetes triangles. Two sides were approximately 23 feet in length with the third side almost 25 feet long. The two units were wheeled so they

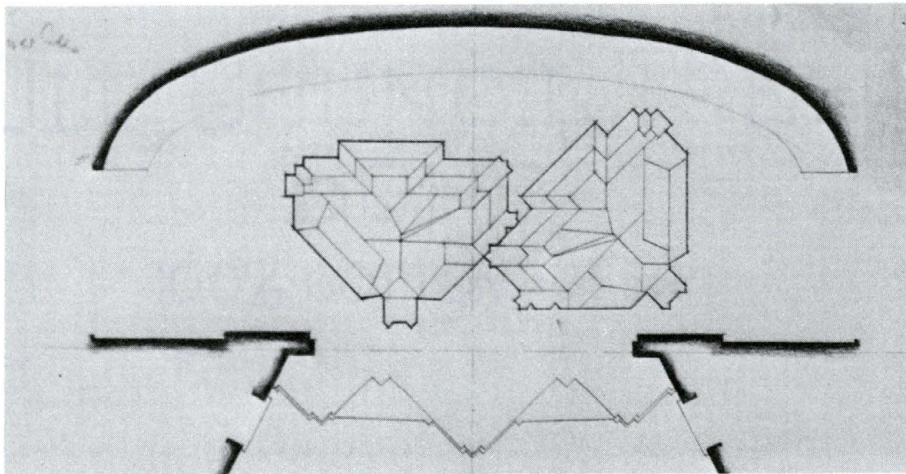
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<sup>13</sup>Norman Bel Geddes, "The Artist in the Theatre," InWhich, September 1915, unpaginated, File #WR-11, n.-1, Bel Geddes Collection.

<sup>14</sup>File #DR-25, f.-7-10, Bel Geddes Collection.

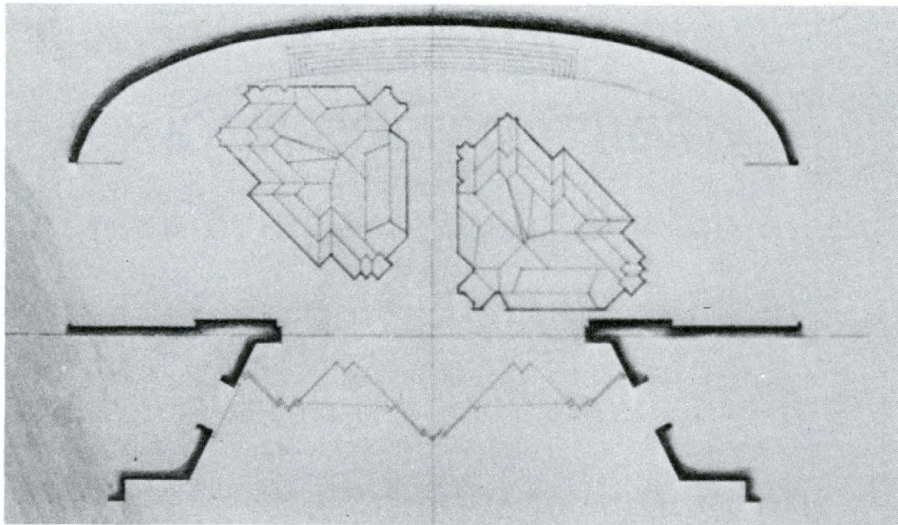


Scene 1

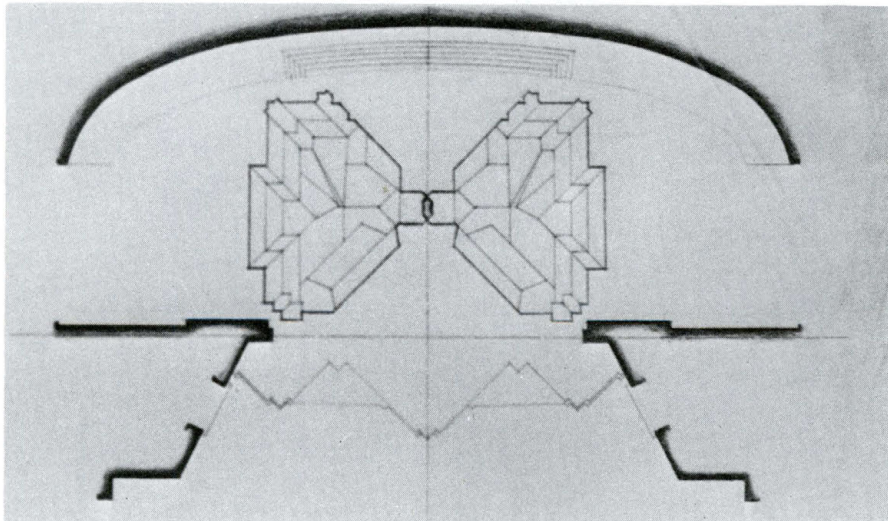


Scene 2

Fig. 9. Lazarus Laughed: Floor plan of settings



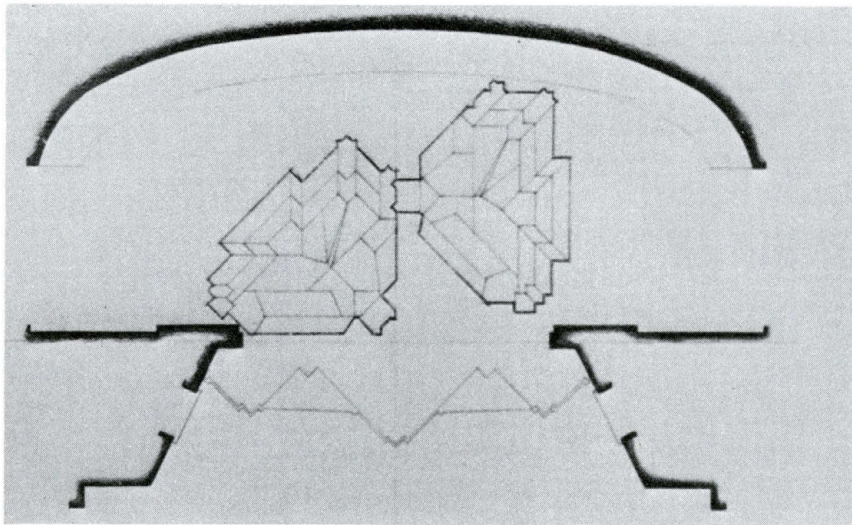
Scene 3



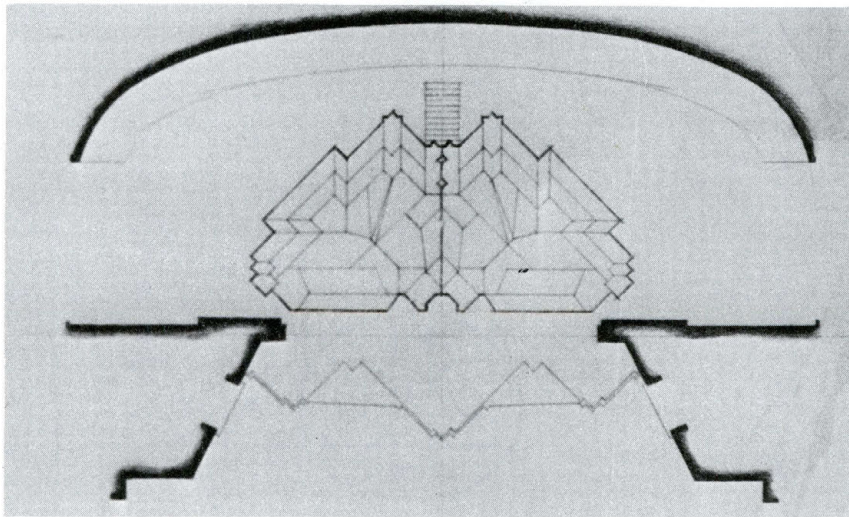
Scene 4

Fig. 10. Lazarus Laughed: Floor plan of settings.





Scene 5



Scene 6

Fig. 11. Lazarus Laughed: Floor plan of setting.

could revolve on stage or roll off, out of audience sightlines. The wagons sat behind the 37 foot proscenium opening of the Goodman Theatre. The edges of the triangles were not smooth. Notches and jogs appeared at seemingly irregular intervals. However, each concave part of one unit had a matching convex part on the other. The wagons meshed at points as they turned like gears with missing teeth. It was not necessary for both units to turn simultaneously. One side could rotate a quarter and create a completely new effect while the other side remained stationary.<sup>15</sup>

Rising from the hardwood floor of these wagons was a myriad of ramps, levels, and platforms. Different shapes, sizes and degrees of incline provided an endless number of possible tableaux.<sup>16</sup> (See Fig. 12.)

Bel Geddes removed the first row of seats in the auditorium and extended the apron of the stage to a point twelve feet further into the house than the existing stage apron. This addition increased the available

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

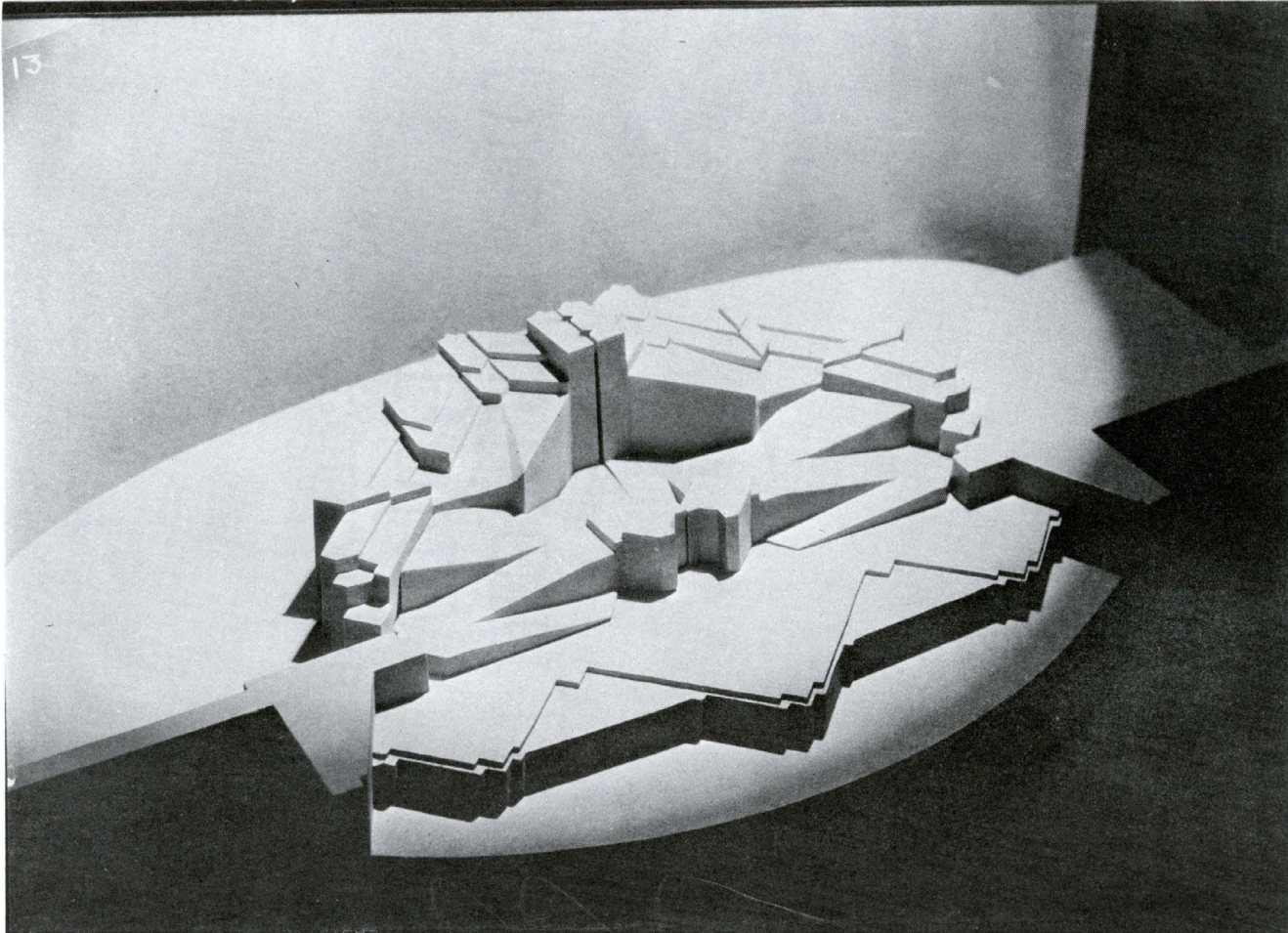


Fig. 12. Lazarus Laughed: Photograph of model setting.

acting area in an important stage location (down center) by about 350 square feet.<sup>17</sup>

No curtains, wings or painted drops were planned. The wagons stood before the giant plaster cyclorama at the rear of the Goodman stage. Acting areas were isolated by lighting, and costumed actors with hand props provided backgrounds. The ramps and levels gave sufficient space for literally hundreds of actors to line up.<sup>18</sup>

The ingenious setting alone made Lazarus Laughed an extraordinary production, but the fact that an O'Neill play was scheduled to premiere outside of Manhattan heightened interest in Bel Geddes' imaginative design. Publicity for the show reflects the generated excitement for Bel Geddes' design. One release described:

... a highly original scheme for making the nine scenes of the play out of the re-arrangement of two monumental units which never change except by turning in different positions. They are set off with properties and decorations carried by the supers against the cyclorama, with immense variety of effect ... The two stage units symmetrically opposite are controlled from within by a motor and may be turned in

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> File #DR-25, i.-1, Bel Geddes Collection.

a few seconds to any position. With this simple invention the drama proceeds without interruptions between such a variety of scenes as the interior of Lazarus' house, a public square in Athens, Tiberious' garden, the Senate Chamber and an amphitheatre.<sup>19</sup>

For the CPPC's production of Lazarus Laughed, Bel Geddes designed all technical aspects. This arrangement was most acceptable because the scenic design relied so heavily on the costume design for color and expression of mood. The necessity for coordination among various artists involved in the production was eliminated. Norman Bel Geddes was the sort of eclectic theatre designer who could complete all these jobs with a high degree of competence.

The playwright divided the characters into seven periods of life according to chronological age. These were further divided into seven general types of character (simple, happy, proud, revengeful, etc.). The instructions provided by the playwright for the costume designer were short and specific, but permitted latitude for creativity: "Each type\* has a distinct predominant

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\*Italics mine.

<sup>19</sup> File #DR-25, h.-9, Bel Geddes Collection.



color for its costumes which varies in kind according to its period\*." <sup>20</sup>

Bel Geddes attacked the design challenge in this area with in-depth analysis. In the fifty pages of costume specifications and descriptions to the contractor his attention to detail was overwhelming. His color specifications on the initial instruction sheet indicate that, concerned as he was with costume details, he was remembering the lighting requirements of the production in relation to color control.

In the applying of dye on materials use a free water color technique to give an uneven quality to the color avoiding the poster technique of flat and clearly defined values. <sup>21</sup>

With a penchant for complete organization, Bel Geddes assigned a number to every costume. A similar numeration system identified the colors and shades of color in fabric and paint for fabric. Painting the color onto a costume was not a technique originated by Bel Geddes, but he used the idea on his costumes for Lazarus

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\*Italics mine.

<sup>20</sup>O'Neill, Lazarus Laughed, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup>File #DR-25, c.-60, Bel Geddes Collection.

Laughed. The depth of his preplanning and organization is revealed in the following excerpts from the voluminous costume specifications he prepared.

Jews Dancers 301-303

MATERIALS: Garment very light woolen material that will take paint; Sash and cap linen.

COLOR: Entire costume of white, grey one, grey two; Makeup olive . . .

Tiberius 114

MATERIALS: Mantle of medium weight linen, border velvet cutout to show design on linen underneath.

COLOR: Ground gold, border black and violet two; Figures on ground violet one; Wreath gold and black; Hair gold; Shoes gold; Makeup pale.

NOTE FOR PAINTER: To gild linen for costume for Tiberius put water and size on linen where gold is to be, leaving portions for figures untouched. Then sprinkle unevenly with gold powder and when dry brush off surplus.<sup>22</sup>

The preceding reference to makeup is not a mistake. Although actors are masked, Bel Geddes' attention to detail calls for the exposed arms and feet to be color controlled. All costume specifications indicate the exact makeup used as well as jewelry and accessories.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

Bel Geddes unified groups of characters with color. Following are three different costume specifications for Greek characters. Each had a shade of orange color somewhere on the costume.

Greek Chorus 208-214 This chorus wears the Greek male age 5 (period of life) costume.

MATERIAL: Undertunic handkerchief linen; Overmantle soft woolen material.

COLOR: Mantel orange two\*; Undergarment white, dots black, double sized masks; Makeup yellow sunburn, barefeet, hair yellow four . . .

Greek Crowd 385-388

MATERIAL: Undertunic linen slightly heavier in texture than handkerchief linen; Over drape handkerchief linen.

COLOR: Ground orange three\* border white; Wig white; Sandals white; Diadem orange one; Makeup yellow sunburn . . .

Greek Crowd 389-392

MATERIAL: Entire costume of handkerchief linen.

COLOR: Ground yellow four, border orange three,\* thin edging black; Makeup yellow sunburn; Sandal orange three, Diadem Orange two\* edged with black; Wig yellow three; earrings orange two.<sup>\*24</sup>

It should be noted that the four actors in the Greek crowd wearing costumes 385-388 are only slightly different from those wearing costumes 389-392. They are

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\*Italics mine.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

just individual enough to prevent the Greek Crowd from looking repetitive, but, with a continuity of orange color and texture throughout that made them easily identifiable as members of the same group.

The costumes for the Jewish characters were full and gracefully draped over the actors like giant capes. (See Fig. 13.) Cut in this way for special effect, the costume designs made the most of the visual effect.

Since O'Neill uses masks and a formal chorus to lend an expressive and noble artificiality to his play of the return of Lazarus from the dead, Geddes has devised the costumes of the Jews so that the hands and arms remain hidden until Lazarus first laughs, when, lifting their liberated hands on high, the people allow the robes to fall back from a forest of up-raised arms.<sup>25</sup>

The most radical experiment in this drama was O'Neill's use, again, of masked actors. Apprehensions surrounding death and death itself, recurrent themes in O'Neill's plays, were manifested by masks used to represent the false face man uses to hide his fear. All characters in Lazarus Laughed are masked except Lazarus who "freed now from fear of death, wears no mask."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>O'Neill, Lazarus Laughed, p. 12.



Fig. 13. Lazarus Laughed: Sketch of costume for  
Jews in scene 1.

O'Neill's requirements for the masks, as expressed in the script, were specific. The organization of the idea surely impressed Bel Geddes.

All of these people are masked in accordance with the following scheme: There are seven periods of life shown: Boyhood (or Girlhood), Youth, Young Manhood (or Womanhood), Manhood (or Womanhood), Middle Age, Maturity and Old Age; and each of these periods is represented by seven different masks of general types of character as follows: The Simple, Ignorant; the Happy, Eager; the Self-Tortured, Introspective; the Proud, Self-Reliant; the Servile, Hypocritical; the Revengeful, Cruel; the Sorrowful Resigned. Thus in each crowd . . . there are forty-nine different combinations of period and type.<sup>27</sup>

This was just the beginning of O'Neill's instructions for the designer. The masks worn by major characters were described in greater detail and had to convey even more about the feelings and emotions of the characters wearing them. Miriam, wife of Lazarus, needed such a mask. O'Neill elaborates further that:

The upper part of her face is covered by a mask which conceals her forehead, eyes and nose, but leaves her mouth revealed. The mask is the pure pallor of marble, the expression that of a statue of Woman, of her eternal acceptance of the compulsion of motherhood, the inevitable cycle of love into pain into joy and and new love into separation and pain again and the loneliness of age. The eyes of the mask are

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12.

almost closed. Their gaze turns within, oblivious to the life outside, as they dream down on the child forever in memory at her breast.<sup>28</sup>

The achievement of this emotional depth in a static mask was a sculptor's challenge. Bel Geddes was equal to it. He had an extensive background sketching faces with emotion. In the summer of 1912, the Field Museum of Natural History of Chicago sponsored his trip to the Lane Deer Reservation near Sheridan, Montana. There he studied the Blackfeet Indians and produced detailed sketches and watercolor paintings of much of what he saw. He had also done portraits for the cover of the New York Times Sunday Magazine section.<sup>29</sup>

No record exists of a model or completed mask. Neither are there extensive instructions for the contractor who would have constructed the masks. It is assumed they would have been constructed from Bel Geddes' sketches, by artists of his choosing and under his direct supervision.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Geddes, Miracle, p. 92.

The extensive collection of Bel Geddes' charcoal drawings of the proposed masks are a tribute to his skill and talent. He captured every nuance of emotion and every subtlety of age difference. Perhaps these masks were the improvement O'Neill sought over The Great God Brown masks created by Robert Edmond Jones. The Bel Geddes renderings certainly achieved a unity the playwright desired.

"In masking the crowds in (Lazarus)," O'Neill once wrote, "I was visualizing an effect that, intensified by dramatic lighting, would give an audience visually the sense of the Crowd, not as a random collection of individuals, but as a collective whole, an entity."<sup>30</sup>

Bel Geddes' artistic commitment to Lazarus Laughed was manifested in his detailed and complete designs for the play. His legal commitment began on January 8, 1927 with a contract on that date between himself and Marion Gering representing the CPPC. It called for Norman Bel Geddes to design and supervise the execution of all the settings, properties, costumes, masks, and the lighting of the production. Further, it was stipulated that he furnish a complete set of working drawings

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<sup>30</sup> Gelb, O'Neill, pp. 600-601.



for all elements no later than February 7, 1927. For this work he was to receive the sum of \$3000 with an additional \$2000 to be paid if the show went on tour to other cities.<sup>31</sup>

The plans were prepared by the specified date and delivered. Bel Geddes pushed ahead with construction preparations. On February 15, 1927, he contracted with the theatrical iron work and stage equipment specialists at Peter Clark Inc., New York, to fabricate four iron substructured platforms riding on ball bearing casters with solid aluminum tires. The substructure was to be covered with a wood floor and brakes provided to hold the platforms in position.<sup>32</sup> This agreement was prepared a mere eight days before an event which would end all work on the production.

Mrs. George French (Mima) Porter was a major backer and vice-president of CPPC. Her husband was a highly respected millionaire tycoon in the Chicago elite community. Recently married, Mrs. Porter devoted herself

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<sup>31</sup>File #DR-25, o.-1, Bel Geddes Collection.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

to the study of occult mysticism and the arts, while her husband devoted himself to making money. The marriage of Chicago's most eligible bachelor evidently was not a happy one. On February 23, 1927, he shot himself at home the morning he and his wife were scheduled to depart on a tour of Europe. The suicide was a tragic shock to Chicago society and a blow from which Mrs. Porter never recovered.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, it also turned out to be a blow to the CPPC.

Porter had left several notes and instructions concerning the handling of his estate. One note to his wife became the death certificate for the CPPC.

. . . Don't put in . . . work and money and have the agony and waste of seeing a failure on a large scale as you now see in the Chicago Play Producing Company on a trivial scale. That would be a waste of yourself and of me . . .<sup>34</sup>

Mrs. Porter, in accordance with her husband's wishes, resigned from her position in the CPPC and ceased her considerable financial support. She gave most of

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<sup>33</sup>Gene Coughlin, "Heartbreak of Society: Mima's Mystic World," The American Weekly, 25 April 1948, pp. 6-7.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

their belongings to friends and spent the remainder of her life as a recluse in Europe.<sup>35</sup> The text of Porter's suicide note influenced other backers and company officers who withdrew their support.

Back in New York, Bel Geddes was busily planning various elements of the production, oblivious to the condition of his employer. His inquiries prompted a wire from the secretary of CPPC.

COSTUMES AND MASK DESIGNS FOR LAZARUS LOST [sic] EXTRAORDINARILY BEAUTIFUL SENDING COLOR SAMPLES OF COURSE UNSPEAKABLY SORRY ABOUT POSTPONEMENT BISSELL HANDLING PRESENT MONEY SITUATION WAS TO SEND YOU CHECK TODAY . . . HELEN DUPEE.<sup>36</sup>

Arthur Bissell claimed a communication breakdown was responsible for keeping Bel Geddes in the dark concerning the situation in Chicago. He apologized in a letter on April 9, 1927, but it seemed there was little chance for immediate payment.

I was under the impression, however, that Mr. Macgowan had kept you more or less posted as to our situation, so did not think it necessary to answer it. All the wealthy guarantors are out of the city and have been for the past month or so.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> File #DR-25, o.-1, Bel Geddes Collection.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Norman Bel Geddes received no financial remuneration for his designs for Lazarus Laughed commissioned by the CPPC.<sup>38</sup>

Lazarus Laughed was never produced by the Chicago Play Producing Company. The play was never produced by any significant professional company.

The play was produced by the Pasadena Community Players in California in 1927 . . . and some years later by New York's Fordham University Players. ("Mr. O'Neill's ponderous script is something that no one could act with much inspiration," wrote Brooks Atkinson in The Times on this occasion.) It was never done on Broadway.<sup>39</sup>

In fairness to the script, although extremely difficult to stage, it includes isolated passages of fine poetry. It also continued the experiment with the staging technique of masked actors. Lazarus Laughed, O'Neill often maintained, contained his best writing.

Certainly it contains the highest writing I have done. Certainly it composes for the theatre more than anything else I have done . . . Certainly it uses masks as they have never been used before and with an intensely dramatic meaning that really should establish them as a sound and true medium in the modern theatre.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>File #AE-44, Bel Geddes Collection.

<sup>39</sup>Gelb, O'Neill, p. 603.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 594.

The Bel Geddes design for Lazarus Laughed was given one last chance for realization on stage thirty years later. In 1957, Bel Geddes, by then a world famous designer, attempted to produce Lazarus Laughed himself using his now famous design. On October 15, he sent a letter to Carlotta O'Neill, executor of the O'Neill estate, asking about the possibility of obtaining permission for mounting a production of Lazarus Laughed.<sup>41</sup> The Richard J. Madden Play Company Inc. noted in a reply that three O'Neill plays were currently running in New York. Mrs. O'Neill and the Madden Company agreed it would be bad business to begin work on a fourth. Bel Geddes persisted and sent a second letter reminding Mrs. O'Neill that his proposal was not another revival but an unproduced play he wished to offer and asked her to reconsider. On October 26, 1957, a curt personal letter from Mrs. O'Neill gave Bel Geddes a final and definite "no" to his requests.<sup>42</sup> He did not pursue the matter any further. This was the last chance the theatre had

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<sup>41</sup>File #DR-25, j.-1, Bel Geddes Collection.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

for a Bel Geddes design of Lazarus Laughed to be realized under his supervision. Norman Bel Geddes died the following year.

Bel Geddes' designs for Lazarus Laughed were never executed and presented for an audience. They were complete, detailed, and revolutionary. The death of a backer caused this loss, but it is possible other circumstances would have prevented the production from being realized if Mr. Porter had not died. The expenses involved for an extravaganza of this type are astronomical. Years of performances would have been necessary to realize a profit for the company. In retrospect, we know that the stock market crash and Depression were only two years away from the planned opening. Speculation for the commercial success of Lazarus Laughed cannot be entirely positive. In 1934, O'Neill wrote: "The cost of mounting such an elaborate play has deterred the New York commercial theatre from risking the gamble."<sup>43</sup> The gamble has not been taken to date and the Bel Geddes design has remained unproduced.

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<sup>43</sup>Gelb, O'Neill, p. 603.

Bel Geddes' design of Lazarus Laughed aptly embodies the playwright's concept. His painstaking care with each technical element to make it reflect the mood desired by O'Neill, is exemplary. Should a modern technician accurately reproduce the Bel Geddes design it would be recognized as a thing of beauty and receive the distinction it deserves.

Lazarus Laughed did not generate the general public acclaim for Bel Geddes that others of his designs caused. The significance of his work on the play is not reduced, however. His color costume renderings, mask sketches, complete working drawings, and model-setting photographs remain as testimonials to his planning and talent. Aesthetically, Bel Geddes had succeeded in his physical representations of the playwright's concept of Lazarus Laughed. Fiscal considerations alone prevented the final actualization of his design, later identified as "the artistic achievement for that year."<sup>44</sup> The design, never tested by director or audience, is

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<sup>44</sup>Hunter, Catalog, p. 9.

fortunately preserved through the fastidious planning and artistic perception of the designer.



## SUMMARY

The designs of Norman Bel Geddes, whether produced or unproduced, show the work of an artist constantly striving for the best in theatre. The quality of creative effort in the unproduced designs discussed in this study approaches this goal. Bel Geddes' forty-two year career, of which the first eleven years were devoted exclusively to work in theatre, has yielded designs that continue to excite and inspire.

The King Lear design would probably have been the first American use of the arena style of staging. A successful and respected New York producer encouraged Bel Geddes to continue his development of the idea but, owing to too full schedules for both men, their plans for an arena stage were never consummated.

In later years Bel Geddes attempted to produce King Lear again. He was frequently disappointed with the shortcomings of other artists in the theatre and an early mentor, Henrik Lund, had advised that an artist should be

his own critic, so Bel Geddes increasingly assumed the varied duties necessary in the preparation of any play on which he worked. In this respect he was more of a regisseur, in the style of Max Reinhardt, than simply "the designer" or "the director." With the set and costumes designed and the adaptation complete, Bel Geddes conducted an unsuccessful search for an actor to play the title role who was available and suitable. Bel Geddes would not trust any of the creative work for King Lear to a collaborating producer. Since few patrons desire to contribute only their money to a play, Bel Geddes remained frustrated on this issue and King Lear remained unproduced.

The project for The Divine Comedy inspired artists and terrified producers. Numerous groups, educational institutions and individuals were contacted for potential "angels." As interest, generated by artistic accolades, increased, many inquiries were sent and Bel Geddes found himself spending more and more of his time answering mail and procuring financial and architectural estimates. He had vivid memories of the entire period.

But as the second year of my occupation with The Divine Comedy drew to a close, I began to realize that it would never be produced. I was on a promotional treadmill--meeting people, discussing details with committees, attending dinners, delivering speeches, revising estimates to meet special conditions, and traveling all over the East--getting precisely nowhere, except into debt. I finally called a halt and contented myself with thinking that, at least, the project created more interest than anything else I had ever done.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, a better time for such a project never existed. The Divine Comedy was planned before labor unions had established their stanglehold on the theatre community; labor costs would soon prohibit a production of this nature. Talking movies did not yet exist to rob the theatre of its audience. The venture of producing a spectacle would probably have succeeded. This is evidenced by the success of a Bel Geddes design that was produced a few years later--The Miracle directed by Max Reinhardt.

The cast requirements for Lazarus Laughed place it in the pageant or spectacle category, but as Bel Geddes was not involved in the development of the script he is not responsible for the huge cast. However, this

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<sup>1</sup>Geddes, Miracle, p. 252.

army of actors did not frighten away the producers. The production was cancelled due to circumstances over which Bel Geddes had no control. By the time he was financially prepared to produce the play himself he could not obtain permission.

The theatre community's faith in the quality of Bel Geddes' design work was never questioned. The designs studied remain unproduced for reasons beyond the control of the designer. The reasons cited were often financial. Perhaps Bel Geddes' demands for space and materials were too extravagant at times, but the results would have more than compensated for additional expenditures. Although each design remains unproduced, all have had impact on the theatre world.

Scholars so frequently refer to the Divine Comedy setting, in discussions of important American designs, that one may forget that the set never progressed beyond the drawing board stage. Marvelous photographs by Francis Bruguière of a model setting contribute to the misconception that it once existed. Bel Geddes' fastidious planning of each play on which he worked provides much more of his work to study than the one or two

watercolor renderings some designers leave to posterity. Although he was sometimes misunderstood by his contemporaries, and considered to harbor some radical ideas, his work was lauded as among the finest representations of the "new stagecraft." It should be noted that it was his more commercial and less abstract designs which were actually mounted and presented on stage. It is his innovative and usually unproduced ideas which insure his place in posterity. A former student and colleague, Mordecai Gorelik, made this observation concerning Bel Geddes' genius.

On the whole the significance of his work has not dawned fully on our theatre, which is inclined to be over-lyrical. When the theatre turns to a new mood its scenic artists will find that Geddes has preceded them.<sup>2</sup>

What significance can unproduced designs have in the study of an artist's work? Every scenic artist has some designs in his portfolio that have not yet been mounted. They may never be. They are the hopes and dreams of the artist. They represent proof that the artist in the theatre is still healthy in his

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<sup>2</sup>Gorelik, New Theatres for Old, p. 308.

questioning of existing conditions, challenging theatre's limitations, and demonstrating the infinite range of aesthetic possibilities in drama. John Mason Brown saw this quality in unproduced designs and observed:

The Dante project of Geddes and The Cenci sketches of Jones are non-existent in the playhouses of Broadway, but they are vital indications of attempts to go beyond its restraints. So, too, are Jo Mielziner's models for Faust and Donald Oenslager's projects for Wagner's Ring and Aristophanes' The Birds, which show that the younger designers are both eager and able to live in their dreams. All of these projects are uncommissioned, self-imposed labors. They may be impractical. They may never be realized. But they point to hopes, reachings out for a bolder theatre. They spring from discontent, an inner compulsion to state an ideal, a capacity for living beyond the present. They point to a will for dreaming and come from the non-conformity of which all vitality in every art is born. Scenery they may be. Just scenery, and not even scenery as yet. But they are really more than that. They are indications that discontent is still alive, that there are ideals which must be stated. As projects they are hopes unrealized. But their chances of ever reaching realization depend first of all upon their having been hopes.<sup>3</sup>

The "hopes unrealized" of Bel Geddes display his genius as a scenic artist. Some of his most important designs were unproduced on the stage, but records of them

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<sup>3</sup>John Mason Brown, Upstage: The American Theatre in Performance (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1930), pp. 156-57.

exist as testimonials to his talent. It may be found some future day that it is primarily for his unproduced designs that we remember Norman Bel Geddes.

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