

Set Pieces

By GLENN LONEY

Most commercial settings, if they aren't worn out from the rigors of Broadway and touring, are burned when their usefulness is over. Sometimes they may be sold to groups who hope to use them later. When Jean Dallymple managed those wonderful revivals of American musicals at City Center, she often bought the sets at the close of a successful Broadway run, knowing she'd be bringing the show back to life in a few years. Unfortunately, when she was retired from that post, the large collection she had built was unceremoniously burned—possibly to make sure no one else would be able to continue the musical series at City Center.

It's sad—and costly, too—that sets from memorable shows have to be disposed of. But who can afford to store them, if they are not to be used frequently? (Currently, a number of opera sets are being traded, rented, or sold.) In the non-profit theatre, sets are most often stripped down and re-used for later productions. Still, while it's a bonus that some costumes and props have survived from notable opera productions or ballets, it's also sad that some of the memorable environments which sheltered them have vanished forever.

Conceptual artist Ann Wilson has begun to do something about that. She doesn't propose to recreate all the settings for *Finian's Rainbow*, nor the haunting Jo Mielziner set for *Death of a Salesman*. Instead, she is concentrating on the reconstruction—as accurately as possible—of some sets or environments which have been landmarks in the history of art, theatre, opera, and dance. Most recently, she showed her "Constructivist Room" at the Artists Space.

In 1977, she presented some oddly impressive reconstructions in the large ground-floor space at 88 Pine Street, where Red Grooms had earlier created his monumental 3-D cartoon of New York, *Ruckus Manhattan*. The major focus of that show was a set of screens, based on Edward Gordon Craig's designs for the

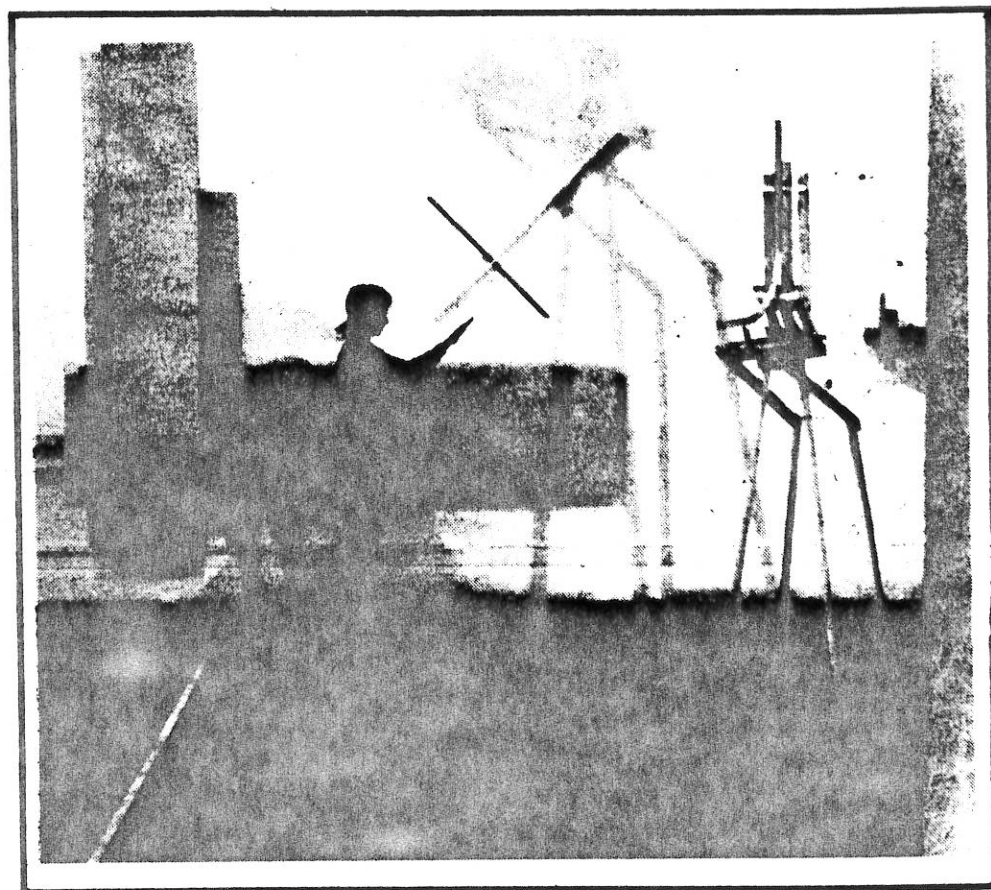
1912 *Hamlet* at the Moscow Art Theatre. In Moscow, they were alleged to have been unwieldy, even to the point of falling over. Wilson found, however, that with careful, sober movers, they were theatrically very effective in the way they could be used to change the shape and size of the performance space. The Craig screens were 22 feet high—very imposing.

Ann Wilson is quick to share the credit. The screens could not have come into being without the skilled assistance of Kathleen Ligon, a very creative young architect, who has worked with her on the Constructivist project as well, providing some elegant drawings of the Room and the objects within it. Nor could the Craig project have been realized without arts funding—for which Wilson is properly grateful—and a host of friends to help with the construction and painting.

It should come as no surprise that Ann Wilson, though not related to Robert Wilson of the monumental stage settings and endless epics, such as *Einstein on the Beach*, worked with that eccentric genius for some ten years. As with Robert Wilson, whose unusual works have been variously described, since no genre classification can contain them, so, too, does Ann Wilson want to find a new mode of expression, of relationship among the art forms.

For those who are filled with foreboding at the idea of a storehouse of old, historic settings—or reconstructions of same—Ann Wilson insists she has no intention of saving or recreating famous theatre environments for their own sake. That has been done, of course, with costumes, but the costumes, inert on faceless dress forms, are robbed of all the life and meaning they once had on stage, on the bodies of dancers, singers, or actors, and moving under changing lighting.

So too with the stage settings. They must be seen under lighting, which can explore their shapes, details, and secrets from various angles and points of view. And they should, even though possibly interesting in themselves, be used for performance, even if not of the original theatre work for which they were intended.



"Cafe Pittoresque," which takes place in Constructivist Room.

If Neil Simon is your idea of a rewarding two hours in the theatre, Ann Wilson's work is probably not for you. But don't be too sure. It's not the same kind of theatre at all, nor does it pretend to be. If you come prepared for a different kind of experience and leave yourself open to whatever you can receive from it—or bring to it yourself—you may be very agreeably surprised. At the very least, you will be forced to relax for a while.

The recent work at the Artists Space will be repeated, in a more advanced state, at the Time and Space Limited Theatre in April. Performances will be held from April 10-12, 17-19, and 24-26, all at 8 p.m., at the theatre, 139 W. 22nd Street. (Phone: 243-9268.) Further engagements are being set for the fall at the Kitchen and the Cooper-Hewitt Museum. (Ann Wilson is hoping to get funding for these latter performances so she can create a proscenium piece.)

All right, you say, but what will one see if one hies oneself off to the Constructivist Room and its performance event, *Cafe Pittoresque*, in April? That's not so easy to say, because a lot depends on the observer and his or her state of mind. Both the environment and the performance are best approached in a mood of tranquility and goodwill. If you are in a hurry, hostile, or distracted, wait till you feel more humane.

At the Artists Space, the room itself was so skillfully achieved that it satisfied thoroughly as a space sculpture. Because Ann Wilson began doing these works as an extended form of assemblage, the human components, though moving, are basically another form or aspect of sculptured form within the environment. They also talk, however, since one represents Rodchenko (Reinhard Geller), the originator of the seven-foot-high wooden sculpture in this enlargement of Lissitsky's 1919 Proun room. The sculpture is copied from the 1921 Moscow "Obmokhu" Group show. It is a construct of elements made from geometric forms. Rodchenko, it is said, was aiming for anti-art, and he may actually have missed his mark, for the sculpture has an odd, pristine, geometric beauty to it.

Unfortunately, Lissitsky isn't on hand, but Kurt Schwitters (Heinrich Spillmann) is in the room with Rodchenko, moving very slowly, like an animated sculpture, measuring, with various rules and tools, lengths, widths, angles, and planes on the walls of the room and in space. He also announces that he is "Merz," a term he coined in 1919. "It was," he then said, "my desire not to be a specialist in one branch of art, but an artist. My aim is the Merz composite art work, that embraces all branches of art in an artistic unit."

All of which sounds like something Ann Wilson might say herself, for that seems to be just what she is trying to do. The two young men, themselves both Swiss and painters, are joined by Sonia Delaunay (Beth Bacon) in their measuring tasks. Although the stage directions for this "opera" indicate that Rodchenko and Schwitters make small, slow gestures and speak in a low conversational voice, what they are saying directly relates to their separate views of art. For instance, Schwitters says: "My images in the darkest erotic caves underwent dissolutions within pure form; facades

and rooms were not merely backgrounds but hieroglyphs." To which Rodchenko responds, though it's not really a response at all: "The shaped is at once reshaped again. If we wish to attain a possibly vivid view of nature, we must keep ourselves first as malleable and pliant."

For a drama critic, that's the kind of dialogue that makes the text of *Waiting for Godot* as banal and obvious as *All My Children*. Nonetheless, it is interesting to view—and, in effect, participate in—this assemblage, this sculpture-in-motion.

Ann Wilson calls her work "Abstract Art Theatre," and her organization "Patchworks Theatre Company." She began making quilts as artworks; one of them is in the Whitney Collections; hence the name. Her group tours, with two-week residencies at colleges and cultural centers. Workshops and performances are the substance, though individual lectures can be booked. Not only will Wilson tour both environment and performance personnel, she will also create a new environment on the spot as part of a workshop, if requested.

Her earlier works, she says, were what she calls visual assemblage sculptures—dream metaphors, "affecting me as the images in dreams. . . powerful and self-contained." Her developing interest in architecture, as various forms enclosing space, which also create a sense of environment which is more than mere construction, was matched by her desire to paint on such surfaces, to bathe them in various degrees and kinds of light, to inhabit them with moving forms, to experiment with ritual gestures, as in the Kabuki theatre or Indian ceremonies, to add some form of dialogue.

Yet, with all these elements of theatre, this was not to be—and indeed has not become—anything like conventional theatre. For Ann Wilson, to expect that that would occur is like expecting an abstract expressionist painting to be immediately perceived as a piece of socialist realism. The thing is what it is, and because it is abstract, undefined, suggestive—"an interior metaphor," Wilson calls it—it can be many things to many viewers.

In the meantime, Ann Wilson continues work on *Cafe Pittoresque* and another opus, *Gymnast*, which will use the Gordon Craig set, a Constructivist "Sappho" room, and a "Pythagorean" room, since the last two authors have given impetus to the work's text. She is dreaming of creating a work based on Goethe's *Faust, Part II*. She continues with her long succession of shows, lectures, and publications, a remarkably relaxed and pleasant woman, considering all her activities and needs for fund-raising and work-time.

At present, the Gordon Craig screen sets are at Muehlenberg College, in Allentown, Pa., where Ann Wilson would like to develop a summer center in work allied with her experiments. But her heart is set on establishing a New York storage-center, exhibition space, and performance studio for using her—and other—reconstructions of famous theatre and art environments or other remarkable milieus. She would like to see various groups able to borrow elements for their own productions. To this end, not only have the Craig screens gone to college in Pennsylvania, but the Craig deck is now in use at the Kitchen.