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## THE STUDIO THEATER

In 1971 Józef Szajna, a charismatic and influential set designer, theater director, painter and theoretician, took over directorship of a theater in Warsaw located in the north wing of the Palace of Culture and Science, the imposing complex of Soviet design completed in 1955. Known for his inclination to formal experiments, Szajna transformed the existing repertory theater into an experimental art center, integrating performances, exhibitions, concerts and film projections. In what later became known as “the theater of visual narration,”<sup>1</sup> Szajna searched for new means of visual expression—suggestive signs, expanded set design and ludicrously enlarged props—that enabled him to offer the audience a peculiar theatrical image referencing the most actual issues. As his innovative approach, amplifying the role of visual elements in performances, also required a new architectural frame, Szajna invited Oskar Hansen to contribute to the changes he was implementing at his newly founded Studio Theater.

Having no previous experience in theater design except for his project for open-air community Theater of Open Form at the Juliusz Słowacki Housing Estate in Lublin, [FIG. 1] Hansen treated the invitation as a great opportunity to test the assumptions of Open Form within a new creative discipline. With a team of designers from the Art and Research Units of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts,<sup>2</sup> he set up the task of transforming the Studio Theater space into an Open Form stage, a task that was of added importance for him because of the theater’s location in the monumental skyscraper in central Warsaw—the building that he regarded as the clearest example of Closed Form.

The Open Theater concept was very much in line with Szajna’s way of thinking. This openness, however, which the theater’s director understood mostly as blurring boundaries between different disciplines of art, as stated in his program speech “Open Theater Only” at the International Meeting of Theater Directors and Set Designers in Florence in 1970,<sup>3</sup> had in Hansen’s proposal a crucial social significance. In keeping with attempts to decon-



FIG. 1

- 1 See Zbigniew Taranienko, “Teatr narracji plastycznej,” *Format*, no. 1–4, 1994, pp. 2–7.
- 2 For a complete list of contributors see Oskar Hansen, *Towards Open Form / Ku Formie Otwartej*, edited by Jola Cola, Warszawa: Fundacja Galerii Foksal, Muzeum ASP w Warszawie, Frankfurt: Revolver, 2005, pp. 120–121.
- 3 Józef Szajna, “Tylko teatr otwarty,” presented during the International Meeting of Theater Directors and Set Designers, Florence, 1970. The text was reprinted in the brochure accompanying his first production at Studio Theater and thus became a kind of manifesto for a new theatrical stage. See Witkacy, *Teatr Studio*, 1972.

struct theater's "fourth wall" dividing it from its audience, as undertaken by Bertold Brecht and Szajna's contemporary Jerzy Grotowski, among others, Hansen proposed a design deprived of any borders between actor and spectator.

The original interior at the Studio Theater was to be converted into a flexible one-space hall with equipment allowing for endless transformation. [FIG. 2, 3] Instead of demarcating spaces for stage and audience, Hansen proposed a floor construction composed of platforms that, when lifted, created different spatial relations adjusted to the needs of a current production. Equipped with numerous apertures permitting free attachment of seats, the floor allowed the stage to be situated in every possible configuration and even moved during a performance. Two levels of balconies, fit with movable chairs and various exit doors, could be joined at any point with light bridges. Fold-up banisters and stairs helped create varied communication schemes. Together with colorful lighting installed in the walls, the space would offer multiple possibilities of arrangement and, as precisely analyzed by Hansen, schemes of stage-audience relations, from the classic proscenium balance to complete audience immersion.

The idea hidden behind Open Form theater was, in these aspects, very similar to concepts of art spaces designed by Hansen such as his proposals for an umbrella-shaped gallery for temporary exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in Skopje (1966)<sup>4</sup> and the steel-and-glass cube extension with a transformable interior for the Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw (1958). In these projects, architecture was meant to become a tool in the hands of its users, allowing for constant adaptation to changing needs resulting from the specific requirements of a given theater production or art exhibition. The Studio Theater space designed for Szajna was to guarantee the director a flexible architectural frame to fit his innovative set designs, to encourage the development of his stage experiments and to enhance their relations to his audience. Hansen's project was presented at the third Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space in 1975.<sup>5</sup> It had been stopped, however, at its conceptual phase, leaving Szajna with a classical theater interior in Warsaw, which became for the experimental director another boundary to broach.



FIG. 2 / P. 134



FIG. 3 / P. 134

4 See Aleksandra Kędziorek, "The Museum of Modern Art in Skopje and the Potentiality of an Exhibition Space," in *Team 10 East. Revisionist Architecture in Real Existing Modernism*, edited by Łukasz Stanek, Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2014, pp. 205–209.

5 See, "III Quadriennale Scenografii Praga, 1976 / The 3rd Prague Quadrennial of Scenography, 1976," *Projekt*, no. 6, 1975, p. 43.