

Summary and Conclusions

Frederick Kiesler dashed across the European and American art worlds with the dauntless enthusiasm of the incurably romantic rebel. Art was formed as a matter of resistance against the dogmatic applications of social, economic and political thought and against conformity to any stylistic monotheism, from realism to pop art. Although highly critical of the continued failure of society to shoulder the problems of the twentieth century and to develop fresh means of artistic and architectural expression fitting for the new age, his attack was very broad and aimed not so much at the destruction of the old as the acceptance of change. He was a tremendously positive and hopeful man, providing ceaseless encouragement to young artists and professional colleagues. Endlessly he integrated interdisciplinarian sources of information, forming and supporting his thought and practice from a milieu of archaeology, psychology, biology, ecology, the history of technology, art, music, theatre and architecture, adding the latest developments in each of these areas.

All of this, combined with his witty turns of language, warm personal concern for friends, volatile impatience, sensitivity to injustice, and smooth Viennese charm, would make it easy to render a highly romanticised view of his contributions to the theatre in general and scenic design in particular. This style of critical treatment is not required. Frederick Kiesler's accomplishments and influences are important enough in themselves to support his significance to the twentieth-century theatre.

Historical Significance and Influences

Kiesler was born in Vienna in 1890, the son of the Chief Magistrate of the city. His early childhood was marred by the cruelty of his brother and indifference of the housekeeper who reared him after his mother's death. Although Kiesler's father was fond of his son, he was a strict disciplinarian. He enrolled his son in an elite Viennese business school, but the young Kiesler left during the first term and presented himself at art school where his

talent gained him advanced standing. With his father's support withdrawn, the would-be architect provided his own education by winning prizes and scholarships to the Technical High School and the Academy of Fine Arts. In 1914 he received his Master of Arts from the latter institution. During his schooling Kiesler had been an intimate of the artists' cafes of the city where he indulged in endless discussions of politics and art. He was conscripted by the Austrian Army and served two years on the front and one with the press corps in Vienna. After the war he married Steffi Frische and was employed by the Social Democrat government as an architect for slum clearance and rehousing projects. In 1923 Kiesler became involved in the theatre.

From the beginning of Kiesler's activity in the theatre in Berlin, he was an innovator. His design for *R.U.R.* in 1922-23 boasted the first sophisticated use of film as a representative of future technology and may have been the earliest use of rear projection techniques. He brought the *Tanagra Aparata* of the puppet stage into the legitimate theatre. He innovated the use of neon lighting instruments as expressive elements of the setting. The performance of *Emperor Jones* late in the same year was the first implementation of the principle of continuous motion for an entire setting.

As director of the 1924 International Exhibition of New Theatre Technique back in Vienna, he assembled hundreds of examples of the latest scenic art in Europe. The Exhibition, although not a great popular success, brought together in a single environment for almost a full month the leading figures of the theatrical avant garde. Prampolini and Marinetti of the Futurist movement, Meyerhold and Tairov of the Constructivist school, Fernand Léger of the late cubist activity, Theo van Doesburg and other members of *De Stijl*, Walter Gropius, Oscar Schlemmer and others from the Bauhaus, Walter Mehring and Hans Richter, members of the failing Dada disorganization and George Kaiser, expressionist writer, were all present and active in the proceedings. These members of the movements representing change in the theatre had the opportunity of meeting and seeing the works of the leading theatrical artists of the state and private theatres of Vienna; this included Max Rinehart whose theatre provided a play as one of the events of the Exhibition.

Kiesler's most important contribution to the 1924 Exhibition was the building of his Space Stage which was the first theatre-in-the-round to be constructed in the twentieth century. The Stage, although designed and built as an arena, was viewed during the Exhibition from only three sides because of the restricted space available for the accommodation of all the scheduled activities. The stage was a smaller and adapted version of the central playing space in the designer's *Endless Theatre* (1923-24). The structure of the stage may have had a direct influence on the stages of two other artist-architects.

The design of Eduard Strum for the George Kaiser play of 1928, *The Burgers of Calais*, might well have been an adaptation of Kiesler's design.¹ Kiesler mentioned in an interview that Kaiser wrote *Gas II* for the Space Stage so the connection may not be wholly coincidental.² More directly related is the stage for the performance of *I Want a Child* at the Meyerhold Theatre in Moscow during 1929. Not only was the producer of the production present at the Exhibition as a guest speaker, the designer of the setting, El Lissitzky, was a personal acquaintance and member of De Stijl with Kiesler.³

Kiesler came to America in 1926 as the apostle of the post-New Stagecraft direction in European scenic investiture. His early attention was transferred from scenic design to the ill-fated International Institute of Theatre Arts, commercial display design and the development of flexible theatre plants. His theatre plants in this period tended to be more conventional in shape and attributes than his Endless Theatre of 1923-24. His unbuilt design for the Brooklyn Theatre of 1926 pioneered the use of a single stage house with an auditorium on either side. The Woodstock Theatre of 1929 utilizes a similar configuration. The arrangement has become prevalent in theatre architecture from the late 1950s to the present. Another innovation, which Kiesler shared with some other exhibitors at the 1924 Exhibition, was realized during the increased building tempo of the 1960s: Kiesler's first Endless Theatre and the Place de la Concorde and the Endless Theatre of the Ford Foundation Ideal Theatre project were all community centers. All were single buildings which housed different theatres for different purposes as well as office and commercial spaces. Each of Kiesler's projects were more inclusive of varying elements of the community than many theatre complexes even of today. A number of architects and theatre consultants including George Izenour have credited Kiesler as the inspiration for their flexible theatres. Walter Gropius, designer of the Total Theatre, much studied as the basis of flexible theatres since 1927, saw Kiesler's first Endless Theatre and its changeable stage and seating areas at the Vienna Exhibition. In addition, Kiesler designed and built in 1928 the first theatre for the exclusive showing of motion pictures on the principles of his funnel-shaped auditorium.

In 1934 Kiesler was employed as the scenic designer for the Juilliard School production of *Helen Retires*. The success of the design led to his continued association with the School as the production manager and scenic director. The partnership of Juilliard and Kiesler lasted almost 25 years until Kiesler's retirement from the position in 1957. The general characteristic of Kiesler's designs during these years was their instructional purpose, low cost and innovative quality.

The architect's endeavors were not limited to theatre during the Juilliard years. Particularly during the 1940s, he was employed as the

designer for several significant exhibitions of modern art. He continued this interest into the 1950s when he was retained as the architect for a number of galleries and museums. His most famous creation was the Shrine of the Book in Israel for the display and study of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Two other architectural projects summarized his interest in housing. Two versions of his creation, *The Endless House*, were shown during the 1950s.

His involvement with exhibition display, particularly that of the Surrealist works, renewed his interest in both painting and sculpture. He developed a form known as galaxial painting in which he executed a single composition on several different canvases which he arranged with space between the separate units. He felt that the spaces were the links between the units which caused the viewer to integrate the units and thereby understand more fully the content of the painting.

His sculpture was defined as "environmental" by his friends, and the term was applied to his works by Kiesler thereafter. Between 1952 and 1965 and even after the artist's death in the latter year, his sculptures received numerous one-man and group showings. The culmination of his work in this field is his final creation, *Us, you, me*.

During the 1950s Kiesler was involved in the support of the Living Theatre and other avant garde activities. His interest may have been generated by the concept of environmental theatre which the new avant garde was creating. In actuality, the environmental stage or integration of the audience and actor was not new; it was proposed and experimentation was conducted during the early twenties by Kiesler, Moreno and others. Richard Schechner has duly credited Kiesler with this influence.⁴ In an article entitled "Where Theatrical and Conceptual Art Blend" in *The New York Times*, Roger Copeland lauds the performance practice of a group called the Mabou Mines, once sponsored by Joseph Papp's Public Theatre. He discusses their balance of the spoken and visual elements of the production and the utilization of sculptors and painters as theatre artists. Repeatedly the article describes the kind of poet's theatre discussed by Kiesler for years; it refers to the total integration of performance elements with the actor and the audience which he had accomplished in *Oedipus Rex* and other productions. The Mabou Mines are "attempting to create what was called total theatre in the 60s."⁵ Echoes are heard in the halls of twentieth-century theatre production.

Theory and Scenic Design

The universe was a single unit for Kiesler. For him everything was interrelated in an endless sequence of change. He perceived this relationship as composed of polarized or opposing elements which were integrated by the

very nature of their opposing forces much like the attraction of positive and negative poles of a magnet. From this view he evolved theories which he expressed in his art. Many of the theories applied to the theatre.

His explanation of technological or historical change accounted for his belief that a new theatre had to be developed with relevance to the milieu of the twentieth century. Most important was his definition of design as the arrangement of polarized elements to achieve a special purpose. In his architecture this was evidenced by his desire to place the performance and audience elements of the theatrical experience within the same space. This idea was applied to his scenic design where he manipulated the configuration and placement of the setting to deemphasize or eliminate the proscenium frame, bringing the stage-audience relationship closer to the architectural arrangement he favored.

Other elements of his thought were evidenced in his designs. The creation of total environments which unified the expressively opposed elements of the setting was a consistently applied idea. His principles of multiple purpose, continuous motion, and space as a link between elements of the composition are also evidenced in his design. His working method relied less on pure intuition than upon intensive research into the production history of plays and the scripts themselves, combined with experimental drawings and collages as a means of developing his ideas.

His handling of the elements of composition indicates a tendency for great simplification of line and a preference for asymmetrical, biomorphic shapes. The texture of the three-dimensional painted settings tended to be smooth and flat. Color was a basic expressive element and was used in unusual combinations and with boldness. Certain symbolic elements tended to be stylized by increasing the size of the objects. His awareness of the stage as space emphasized playable staging areas and elevated levels. Mass was manipulated to achieve a balance of scenic objects rather than to emphasize any single object.

The scenic devices of projection, both still and moving, and bold spotlighting techniques are characteristic of his work. For a period of experimentation during the 1940s, he placed the primary playing space on platforms in a pedestal-like arrangement apparently to achieve the separation of symbolically treated areas of the stage and to improve the stage acoustics. Most significant, and the element which most distinguishes Kiesler's work, is his blatant use of symbols in portions of his settings. This phenomenon is a direct result of the application of his design theory. If designs were to depict polarized themes, images, etc., within the script, then differences between the elements had to be communicated clearly to the audience. To define by emphasizing differences in one way to focus upon central meaning. Oversized symbolic elements were the designer's device to assure understanding on the part of the viewer.

Kiesler's design was bolder in its interpretive nature than the work of the advocates of the New Stagecraft. His designs were combinations of three major theatre art movements given his own special integration. From each movement with which he experimented he chose what he considered the most valuable and rejected the remainder. This operation was probably not a conscious activity, but the results of close exposure and interaction with the avant garde of the early 1920s.

From the Futurists Kiesler might have adopted his ideas concerning continuous movement of the scenic environment during the progression of the play. Likewise, he may have been inspired to employ neon lighting devices by an article written by Prampolini. He shared the strong use of color with both the Futurist and the Expressionist painters. He rejected, however, their harsh angularity, just as he did the rectangular configurations of the De Stijl group.

Also, characteristic of Expressionist art was a concern for the depiction of inner states of mind and a more blatant use of symbolism than found in the New Stagecraft movement. These characteristics are reflected in Kiesler's designs.

Kiesler's concern for the stage as a performance space drew his interest to the Constructivist movement. The Constructivists approached design from the perspective of creating a machine for acting. Their basic concern in performance was the expressive movement of the body. For this reason, ramps, stairs and varying platform levels were provided to stimulate the maximum amount of varied movement. The supports for ramps, stairs and platforms were left exposed and unpainted. After his experiment in *Francesca* (1924), Kiesler abandoned this aspect of Constructivist design. His later settings, though allowing for sweeping and vital movement, are enclosed and smoothly finished in the manner sometimes referred to as Formalism.

During the 1940s Kiesler was associated with the Surrealist movement. Some of their influence is found in the nightmare shapes the designer used in the backdrop for *The Mother* (1942) and the tavern of the sailor's wife in *The Poor Sailor* (1947). Overall though, Kiesler seems not to have adopted any of the other devices or theories of the movement.

Although Kiesler lived and worked in New York for forty years and had numerous contacts in the theatre, he never became an influential commercial designer. There are three basic reasons for this phenomenon: poor timing, eclecticism and personal style.

When Kiesler came to America he was an outspoken and misunderstood rebel from the European avant garde. The design style he advocated was quite different from the desires of Broadway producers. The art theatre movement represented by the Theatre Guild and the other

sponsoring agencies of the 1926 International Exposition would have been a better testing ground for the innovative Kiesler. Unfortunately, those groups had little need for his services. Lee Simonson was a member of the board for the Theatre Guild and performed the design function of the organization. Robert Edmond Jones and other well-known New Stagecraft designers were readily available for employment by the art theatres, and so Kiesler's activities had to be directed into less overpopulated areas. He was successful in capitalizing on his involvement with the Film Theatre Guild which was a direct result of his organization of the International Theatre Exposition of 1926.

The opportunity to join the Juilliard staff may have occurred only after the door was opened by the presentation of George Antheil's opera. Kiesler might have been invited to design *Helen Retires* by his former De Stijl associate. The facts are not known. The work at Juilliard must have influenced his employment by the Metropolitan Opera in 1935 for the design of *In the Pasha's Garden*, but the design was not well received by the critics of conservative and traditional vein.

Kiesler was employed by *The New York Times* in 1944 for the industrial presentation of *The Fashions of the Times*. Two years later the theatre critics greeted with applause his rendering of *No Exit*. Following that production Kiesler was occupied with preparations for the Surrealist Exhibition in Paris and could not have been available for work during the following season.

Kiesler's final attempt at commercial theatre design was *Henry IV*. When he sought employment, he approached two agents, but they did not want to see his work or operate on the personal level to which Kiesler had become accustomed in the art world and at Juilliard. Even after acquiring the commission for *Henry IV* with the aid of an agent with whom he had only spoken on the telephone, he had the misfortune of having the production close during its tryout performances.⁶

Kiesler did not fit well into the operating model of Broadway and was apparently happy working at Juilliard where he had considerable freedom to attempt new and different approaches to operas of various musical styles. His design projects are stylistically consistent with his actualized designs, an observation which cannot be made with regard to some commercial designers of the period whose work indicates that they dreamed in one style and created realistic interiors in multiple variations.

Above all of this, Kiesler was an eclectic of the first order. The diversity of his activities spans the spectrum of artistic endeavor. He was exhibited in both group and one-man shows as a painter, sculptor and architect. He was, in his later years, a building architect whose commissions took him to North Africa and South America. Interest in film was a continuing pursuit for Kiesler. He was an active member of the artistic community in Greenwich

Village where he filled his spare time with the research and writing of as yet unpublished books on architecture and on his application of Correalism to various industries. His life hardly had room for the pursuit of still another career in commercial scenic design.

Research Potential

This study has not presented a definitive assessment of Kiesler's many endeavors. It does provide a historical perspective and a description of his theories which can serve as a basis for studies in other fields. Research into his painting, sculpture, typography, architecture, furniture designs, and film work would certainly prove fruitful. Of particular interest to the theatre would be a presentation of Kiesler's theatre architecture and his role in the development of flexible theatre design.

Further investigation into the unauthenticated scenic designs of the artist is desirable. The archives of Kiesler's associate, Frederic Cohen, staging director for the Juilliard School, might provide additional information, as might the exploration of any materials Mrs. Kiesler has yet to catalogue. Martha Graham might be contacted for information on the designs which Kiesler provided for her ballets. The operations and fate of the International Institute of Theatre Art might well be provided by the Princess Matchabelli who resides in Connecticut but has not responded to inquiries. Burgess Meredith, who played the title role in *Henry IV*, could provide further insight into the operation of the Kiesler setting. The producer of *No Exit*, Oliver Smith with whom Kiesler may have visited in 1947, could offer insight into Kiesler's concepts of the play. Information on *The Tempest* might be secured from The Cincinnati Symphony as well as the records of the Empire State Music Festival should they be located. Finally, interviews and an investigation into the operations of the Living Theatre might clarify Kiesler's participation in the group's activities and lead to connections he might have had with other experimental groups during the 1950s and 60s.

Recent letters have suggested two more sources of information regarding Kiesler's activities in the theatre. Correspondence and conversation with Mel Gordon of *The Drama Review* confirms the existence of materials in Mr. Gordon's possession regarding Kiesler's work in Europe.⁷ Mrs. Kiesler refers to a conversation she had with Mrs. Cohen, the widow of Kiesler's associate Frederic Cohen, in which they discussed Kiesler's involvement with the "Nine O'Clock Theatre." The group intended to produce "all types of shows of the legitimate stage and the lyric theatre."⁸ Francis Banard was the organizer of the project, but Mrs. Kiesler has been unable to locate his whereabouts.

It seems unlikely that information from any of these as yet untapped sources would change any of the general conclusions of this research as they

pertain to the theatre; they would only add details, and possibly a little more depth. Other topics are, of course, available for consideration in other fields of endeavor which makes the study of Frederick Kiesler's art, as with any worthy scholarly affair, a seemingly endless pursuit.

Frederick Kiesler was a major contributor to the holistic philosophy of the twentieth century. As Teilhard de Chardin tried to unite science and theology and Einstein attempted to unite atomic structure and the operations of the universe, so Kiesler's theory united the world of man in an ever changing continuity held together by the forces generated by the parts. This philosophy led him to various conclusions about the relationship of man to nature and to art. These conclusions are prominent in his artistic creations both in the theatre and other expressive mediums.

The artist had an effect on the theatre in four significant ways. First, he constructed a theory of design which articulated clearly the relationship of visual elements in a setting placed in opposition to one another to amplify the meaning of the text. This approach to design is akin to the use of metaphor in writing and, in fact, has been used by designers other than Kiesler. The architect's particular contribution was the lucid explanation of this underlying concept of visual expression.

Second, Kiesler provided leadership and was a unifying force in the avant garde of the 1920s and, indeed, throughout his life. As director of the Exhibition of New Theatre Technique in 1924, he brought together in Vienna the leading exponents of change in the theatrical milieu of the times. In 1926, almost ten years after Samuel Hume brought the New Stagecraft designs to America, Kiesler arrived to present the designs of Futurist, Constructivist and other movements in the continuing evolution of European scenic art. The effect of the interchange of ideas and exposure to new ideas which Kiesler fostered, while difficult to measure, was certainly significant.

Third, flexible theatre architecture was greatly advanced by Kiesler's ideas. Both the Flexible Endless Theatre of 1923, featuring a central stage, and the two house prosceniums of the Brooklyn and Woodstock theatres have provided inspiration for other architects. Kiesler's ideas for the totally flexible theatre featuring sophisticated projection techniques has never been fully realized. While many other architects, such as Walter Gropius, might well have developed the flexible theatre without Kiesler's ideas, their concepts would be more mechanical and less aesthetic were it not for his contribution.

Finally, Kiesler's activities as a scenic designer made a significant contribution to that art. His designs for *R.U.R.* and *Emperor Jones* united many of the concepts of design which Futurists and Expressionists talked about but which Kiesler realized in his own special integration. Evidence suggests his influence on other European designers of the 1920s and while

less influential in the American climate of scenic design, he was a leading exponent of design beyond the New Stagecraft in New York during his association with the Juilliard School of Music.

The total effect of Kiesler on the theatre and the art world in general cannot yet be evaluated. The number of articles concerning the artist during the 1970s has increased annually as have exhibitions of his art works, particularly his sculpture. Perhaps the times are catching up to Kiesler in the arts; his theories are becoming increasingly intriguing to wider circles of the art audience. The future may see the building of the Endless House and the Endless Theatre or other creations that embody his most advanced aesthetic concepts. Only then will scholars be able to comprehend the impact of Kiesler's endless innovations, and perhaps only then will Kiesler's dream of the ethical manipulation of technology to maintain all men's health be realized.

Chapter 7

1. Margot Berthold, *A History of World Theatre* (New York: Ungar, 1972), p. 587.
2. "Kiesler's Pursuit of an Idea," p. 171.
3. Henning Rischbieter (ed.), *Art and the Stage in the 20th Century* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1969), p. 128.
4. Richard Schechner, "6 Axioms of Environmental Theatre," *The Drama Review*, XII (Spring, 1968), p. 51.
5. Roger Copeland, "Where Theatrical and Conceptual Art are Blended," *New York Times*, May 1, 1977, pp. D12, 20.
6. *Inside the Endless House*, pp. 104-6.
7. Mel Gordon to R. L. Held, June 10, 1977.
8. Lillian Kiesler to R. L. Held, January 28, 1977.