

Designing Modern Life – The Impact of Theatre on American Society

Christopher Innes

Normally we think of theatre as simply the reflection of society, “holding the mirror up to life” as Hamlet put it – and if theatre influences the political scene, changes people’s lives, or promotes cultural developments, then it’s due to its emotional or intellectual effect on individuals, working as a purely mental catalyst. And while a performance may (in just the right circumstances, as with Clifford Odets’ classical agitprop, *Waiting for Lefty*) incite the spectators to a specific and immediate action, any longer-term impact is subliminal, and almost impossible to trace. However, there is a really striking example of just the opposite: theatre directly shaping the lifestyle and expectations of society. And although this goes back to the period between about 1925 and 1950, the new society in question was America; and the American concept of modernity has spread everywhere. Not only in the shape of Disneyworld in France, or identical Hilton Hotels, but through Hollywood, clothing and fashions, advertising styles, even the way our goods are packaged. So this example is still highly relevant today – as well as suggesting new avenues that contemporary theatre might pursue.

The people responsible for creating what we think of as “modern life” were two stage-designers: Joseph Urban and Norman Bel Geddes.

There’s actually an Austrian connection here, since Urban was born and trained in Vienna, starting his artistic career as a founder of the Hagenbund and designing scenery for the Burgtheater. And already at the turn of the century he had begun turning public