



The play-within-a-play scene: Peter Millard as the Stage Manager interrupts a music hall performance to announce a British victory in the Boer War to the “audience.”

Opposite: the Ballroom scene; model for the set (photos by David Cooper).



Noel Coward’s epic play *Cavalcade* with its 40 scenes, hundreds of characters and multiple costume changes presented many challenges for the Shaw Festival in its 1985-86 North American premiere of the work. The play spans thirty years of British history from 1899 to 1929 and, in Coward’s time, it was produced with a cast of hundreds and required pauses of up to forty minutes in order to change the scenery.

The original audience would have had a more recent memory of many of the events depicted in the play but a modern audience can still relate to its universal theme of a family’s experience against the background of war. Many of the events depicted, such as the sinking of the *Titanic*, remain a strong part of our cultural memory.

To Cameron Porteous, *Cavalcade* was like an historical film documentary: “It’s the kind of thing that television does so well, with all their techniques of dissolving and cutting from one scene to another”. He compares his job on this production to that of a marathon runner whose challenge was not so much winning the race but simply completing it. *Cavalcade* places enormous technical demands on its designer. A wide range of locations and epochs – from spectacular outdoor crowd scenes to domestic “two-handers” – are expected to flow smoothly from scene to scene within seconds. The design of such a large production also had to take into account repertory conditions at the Shaw Festival with three other productions limiting facilities for storage, set-up and changeover.

Porteous’ central image as he approached *Cavalcade* was that of glass: “I somehow wanted the audience to see the historical story as if through layers of glass, or as if reflected in a mirror.” He was also influenced by the huge glass dome over London’s Victoria Station with the steam of the trains rising up through the air. Later in the play, this steam would turn into the lethal yellow mustard gas of the First World War.

His challenge was to realize this concept while meeting the complex technical requirement of the play.

His technical solutions to these problems relied on elaborate mechanical systems that the audience never saw. A huge hydraulic turntable transported entire scenes on and off the stage quickly and quietly, carrying actors, props, furniture and all. The production’s numerous kaleidoscopic backgrounds were created by six enormous slide projectors from behind the set. The use of projections and two revolving turntables not only allowed the play to move smoothly through time but enhanced Porteous’ kaleidoscopic vision of the play. This effectively combined a scenographic concept with an elegant technical solution that enhanced the evanescent spirit of change and evolution central to the theme of the play.

PATRICIA FLOOD

BASED ON INTERVIEWS WITH CAMERON PORTEOUS, WITH SECTIONS ABRIDGED FROM THE 1986 EXHIBITION CATALOGUE *THE PICTORIAL STAGE* PGS 81-82.

