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Settings designed by Leo Kerz

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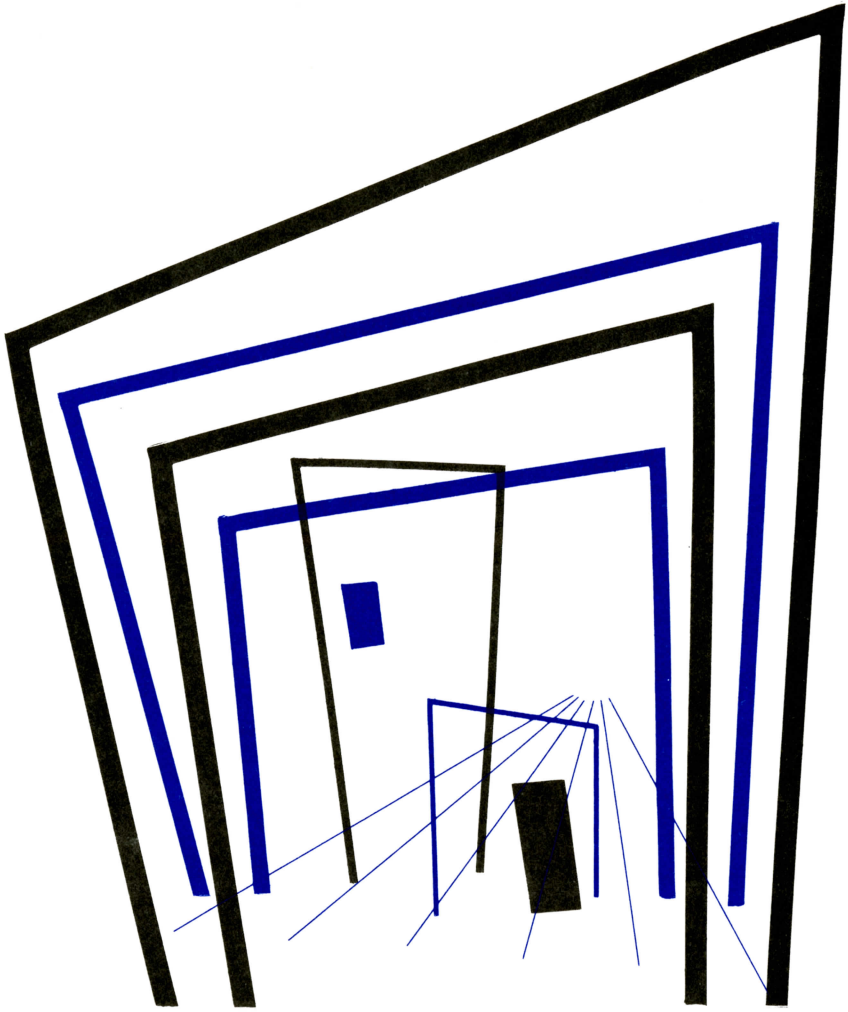


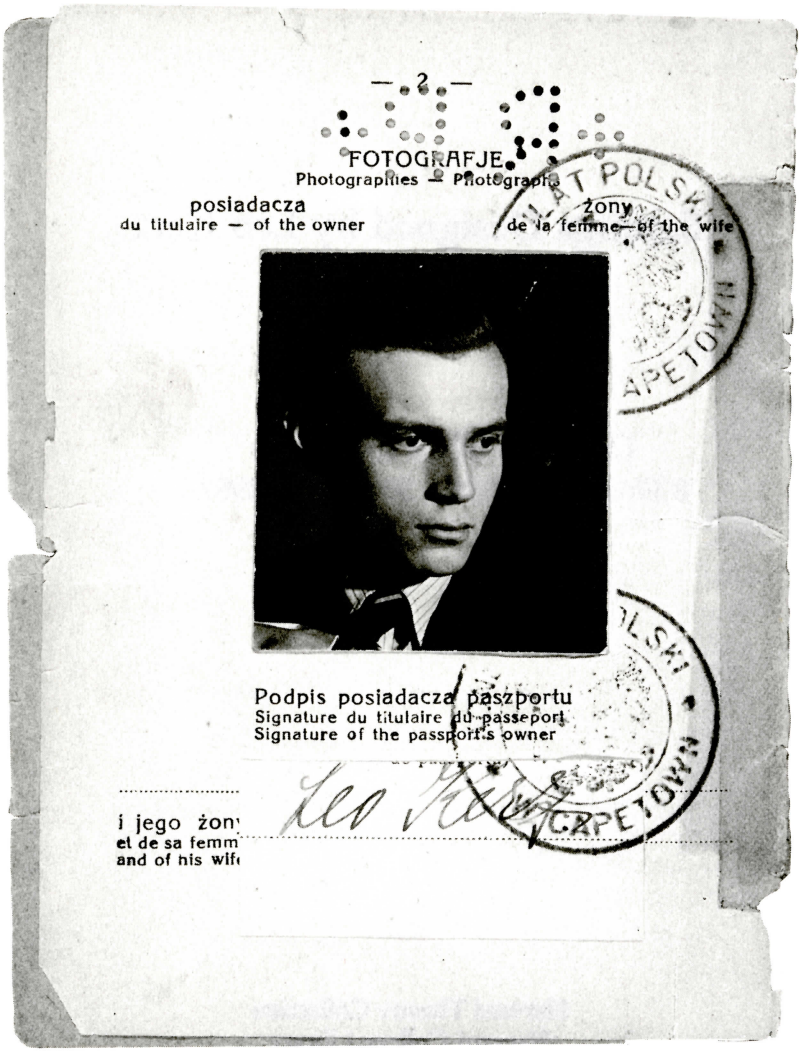
SETTINGS DESIGNED BY LEO KERZ

Harvard Theatre Collection

Settings Designed by Leo Kerz

Catalogue of the Exhibition
8 December 1986 – 30 January 1987

Harvard Theatre Collection
Harvard College Library
Cambridge, Massachusetts



Leo Kerz
1912 – 1976

Settings Designed by Leo Kerz

Catalogue

Leo Kerz was born in Berlin to Polish-Jewish parents on November 1, 1912. He received a Bachelor's degree from the Friedrich Ebert Oberreal School, Berlin, in 1932 and attended the Academy of Arts and Science, Berlin, in 1933. The beginning of Leo Kerz's theatrical career coincided with the close of a particularly vital period of the German stage as well as with a period of intense political turmoil. Throughout the twenties as the technological developments of the "new stagecraft" proliferated, the German stage was filled with the work of the major exponents of Expressionism, Dadaism, Neorealism, and Constructivism. Perhaps the most important influence on Kerz at this time and throughout his career was the work of director Erwin Piscator (1893-1966). Kerz studied with Piscator and his leading designers, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (d. 1946) and Traugott Mueller, while attending school in Berlin from 1929 to 1933. He worked as an assistant to designer Caspar Neher (1897-1962) on the first production of Brecht's *Die Dreigroschenoper* at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in 1928. Kerz made his own debut as a designer at the same theatre in 1932 with two studio productions. He also was awarded the Goethe prize for stage design in 1932. As Piscator's left-wing political theatre made increasing demands on theatrical space, Kerz worked with the designers who were developing and expanding scenic technology. Together with Traugott Mueller, Piscator is credited with introducing "new forms of theater whose scenographic means were the architectonic structure, lighting and projected images instead of the canvas and artist's paints." [Denis Bablet, *Revolutions in Stage Design of the XXth Century,* p. 154]. These new forms became essential elements in Leo Kerz's developing style.

When Hitler established his total dictatorship in 1933, the entire left-wing theatre in Germany was shut down or dispersed. Kerz, along with many other Jewish artists, writers, and performers left Germany, finding work in Prague, Amsterdam, and London from 1934 to 1936.

In 1936 Kerz went to Johannesburg, South Africa where he established the Pioneer Theatre, the first avant-garde theatre in South Africa

to use an inter-racial cast. Working with the Pioneer Theatre and other groups, he designed, produced and staged numerous productions of contempory plays including an English translation of *The Threepenny Opera,* with lyrics by Christopher Isherwood, *Golden Boy, The Hairy Ape,* and *Gas* (1937-1942).

(1) Pages from scrapbook with a playbill for one of the first plays designed by Leo Kerz, *Arzte im Kampf,* Berlin 1932; two announcements of a group exhibition which included his work; and a photograph with two newscuttings about the Bantu People's Theatre production of O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape,* Johannesburg, 1937. Gift of Paul Kerz, 1985.

(2) Eight designs for a production of Georg Kaiser's trilogy, *Gas* [Johannesburg, c. 1938]:
a. Office scene. 22.8 × 27.2 cm.
b. Apartment scene. 22.7 × 27.2 cm.
c. Ship deck. 22.4 × 27.5 cm.
d. Factory scene. 22.2 × 27.2 cm.
e. Scrim backcloth. 22.6 × 26.9 cm.
f. Street scene. 22.6 × 26.9 cm.
g. Office scene. 29.5 × 35.9 cm.
h. Refinery scene. 32.5 × 49.8 cm.
Anonymous gift, 1981.

(3) Passport for Leo Kerz issued by the Republic of Poland through the Polish consul in Capetown, South Africa, 1937. Includes immigration visa granted by the American Consulate General, Johannesburg, South Africa, 6 May 1941. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(4) Registration Certificate issued Leo Kerz by the Union of South Africa, 1939. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

In 1941, Mr. Kerz left South Africa for the United States where he worked as assistant to several established New York designers, including Jo Mielziner, Watson Barratt, and Stewart Chaney. From 1943-1944, he taught stage design, costume design, lighting, and make-up at the New School for Social Research where Erwin Piscator had been Director of the Dramatic Workshop since 1939. After leaving Germany in 1931, Piscator had worked in the Soviet Union and in France before coming to the United States. Once established in New York Piscator had been able to assist many of the newly arrived exiles from Germany in search of work in the American theatre.

(5) *The Good Soldier Schweik.* Design by Leo Kerz for a proposed but unrealized production, New York, 1944. 38 × 50.9 cm. Anonymous gift, 1981.

The *Good Soldier Schweik* was to have been directed by Piscator for the Theatre Guild, using an adaptation of Jaroslav Hasek's novel by Alfred Kreymborg and Bertolt Brecht's play with incidental music by Kurt Weill. Piscator tried several times without success to recreate the history-making success of his 1928 Berlin production of *Schweik.* For the Theatre Guild production, Kerz planned to use cut-out puppet-like figures to supplement the real actors and mechanically projected scenic effects. Since his arrival in New York Kerz had worked on adapting European methods of scenic projections to the architecturally different American theatres. Kerz continued to use and further develop these techniques throughout his career. Although *Schweik* was not to be realized, in 1945 Kerz designed the settings for a production of Brecht's *The Private Life of the Master Race* for Piscator at the Pauline Edwards Theatre in New York.

Early in 1947 Mr. Kerz received confirmation from the Red Cross that his family had not survived deportation from The Hague to a concentration camp during World War II.

(6) Letter to Leo Kerz from the Netherlands office of the Red Cross confirming the death of his whole family in a concentration camp during World War II, 1947. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

In June, 1947, Kerz received his first major Broadway assignment when he was hired by Katharine Cornell and Guthrie McClintic to design their production of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra.*

(7) *Antony and Cleopatra.* Design for the 1947 production with Katharine Cornell, Martin Beck Theatre, New York. 27.8 × 47.5 cm. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(8) Three photographs of scenes from *Antony and Cleopatra,* 1947. Gift of Paul Kerz, 1985.

(9) United Scenic Artists of America contract signed by Leo Kerz and Gertrude Macy, secretary for C. and M.C. Productions Inc. for the production of *Antony and Cleopatra.* Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(10) Technical drawings for the Roman galley scene, *Antony and Cleopatra,* Martin Beck Theatre, New York, 1947. 45.1 × 76.8 cm. Gift of Leonard Lesley in memory of Anneliese Lesley, 1985.

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In her review of the production in *Theatre Arts Monthly* (January, 1948), Rosamond Gilder wrote that "Leo Kerz's settings with their use of contrasting forms and colors for the Egyptian and Roman episodes together with John Boyt's costumes for the contending forces of Antony and Octavius help to clarify these elements of diversity and conflict."

Following the success of *Antony and Cleopatra,* Jose Ferrer commissioned Kerz to design a setting for a production of *Richard III* but he was forced to abandon the project when film commitments intervened. In an article written for *Players Magazine* in 1959, Professor Orville Larson discusses the Kerz model in detail and favorably compares its "brilliant concept" in its use of an architectural unit setting to Lee Simonson's more well-known *Hamlet* model.

(11) Photograph of the model for a projected but unrealized production of *Richard III.*

Leo Kerz designed the New York productions of *A Long Way from Home* (1948), *Bravo* (1948), *The Biggest Thief in Town* (1949), *The Victim* (1952), and *The Sacred Flame* (1952), and *The Gypsies Wore High Hats* for the Cape Playhouse, Dennis, Massachusetts (1952). In addition he was staff designer for CBS from 1949 to 1954 and art director for numerous films, including *This is Cinerama* (1952).

(12) Letter to Leo Kerz from Bertolt Brecht, Berlin, 13 May 1954. Brecht agreed in principle to Kerz's proposal that he prepare a translation and a production of *Mann ist Mann* in coordination with Eric Bentley. Although Kerz completed his work on the translation, the production was never realized. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(13) Photostat of the manuscript score by Paul Dessau for *Mann ist Mann,* Berlin, 1956. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

In 1955, Kerz joined the San Francisco Opera Association where he designed the world premier of Sir William Walton's opera, *Troilus and Cressida,* as well as productions of *Macbeth, Aida, Löhengrin, Der Rosenkavalier,* and *Die Walkerie.* He became art director, designer, and lighting director for the company in 1956.

(14) *Die Walkerie.* Design for the San Francisco Opera production, 1955. 40.6 × 35.5 cm. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(15) *Troilus and Cressida.* Two photographs by Robert Lackenbach of the San Francisco Opera production of the opera by William Walton, 1955, with settings by Leo Kerz. Gift of Paul Kerz, 1985.

The Metropolitan Opera of New York commissioned Kerz to design new settings for productions of *The Magic Flute* and *Parsifal* in 1956. *Opera News,* March 19, 1956, praised his innovative approach to designing *Parsifal* citing his decision to "recreate the ceremonial aspects of the music drama in modern terms, rather than to perpetuate its fairy-tale values." Kerz described the settings as "a single dramatic circle, twenty-four feet in diameter, six inches higher than the stage floor at the footlights, rising to perhaps five feet at the rear. Back of this stage a ninety-foot cyclorama is used with varied projections of lighting indicating the various scenes."

(16) *Parsifal.* Design for the New York Metropolitan Opera production, 1956. 38.1 × 48.4 cm. Loaned by Dr. and Mrs. Arthur Okinaka.

(17) *Clerambard.* Two photographs of scenes from the comedy by Marcel Ayme, adapted by Norman Denny and Alvin Sapinsley, and produced by Leo Kerz, Leonard Lesley, and Joy Thomson at the Rooftop Theatre, New York, 1958. The production was designed and lighted by Leo Kerz. Gift of Paul Kerz, 1985.

During the 1957 season Kerz designed several productions for the New York City Opera under the direction of Erich Leinsdorf, including the premier of Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah.*

In 1961, Kerz brilliantly secured the American rights for Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* which he produced as well as designed in association with Seven Arts Associates Corporation. *Rhinoceros,* described by Ionesco as "an anti-Nazi play," is equally an attack on collective hysteria and on conformity. As the producer of the American premier of the play, Kerz demonstrated his own non-conformist ideals when he deliberately opposed some of the theatre industry's standard commercial methods. His chief target was the common practice of using quotes from the critics' reviews in advertising. Kerz believed that a review was an important comment only when read in its entirety and that it insulted both the critic and the public "to reduce such comment to the level of a consumer's report." After the play opened to critical acclaim, Kerz was under considerable pressure to reverse his position. Eventually he circulated a pamphlet in which he reproduced each review in its entirety. Certainly, his production of *Rhinoceros* forcefully combined Leo Kerz's creative powers and the moral convictions of this artist-in-exile.

(18) *Rhinoceros.* Design for the American premier of the play by Eugene Ionesco, produced and designed by Leo Kerz, Longacre Theatre, New York, 1961. 36.3 × 51.1 cm. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(19) *"Sur les differentes façons de mettre en scene 'Rhinoceros.'"* Typescript of an essay by Ionesco concerning productions of the play in Dusseldorf, Paris, and London. [n.p.,n.d.] 7s.(7p.). Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(20) *Rhinoceros.* Window card advertisement for the New York production, 1961. Anonymous gift, 1981.

(21) Outer Circle Award, 1960-1961, for the most creative overall contribution to the season: *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(22) Letter to Leo Kerz from Brooks Atkinson, 3 May 1961, in which Atkinson calls *Rhinoceros* the "best foreign play of the season, and certainly a brilliant job of direction and acting." Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(23) Technical drawing for Act II, scene i, of *Rhinoceros,* Longacre Theatre, New York, 1961. 57.5 × 90.2 cm. Gift of Leonard Lesley in memory of Anneliese Lesley, 1985.

In 1951, when the anti-Communist persecutions led by Senator Joseph McCarthy were focusing on the theatrical community, Piscator, who had been assumed to be a member of the Communist party because of his sympathies before he came to the United States, returned to Europe. In 1962, he became general director of West Berlin's *Freie Volksbuhne* and invited Leo Kerz to design the world premier of the controversial drama *Der Stellvertrete* [*The Deputy*] by Rolf Hochhuth (b. 1931) in Berlin. The play accuses Pope Pius XII and the Roman Catholic clergy of failure to resist Hitler's treatment of the Jews during World War II. Predictably, the first performance of the provocative play caused tremendous protest and counter-protest. Franz Spelman reported that "at the first performance, the scene which presented the Pontiff was interrupted by a flurry of boos and hisses. But, though the program notes asked the public to refrain from applause at the end, the ovation lasted through 20 curtain calls until both author and director appeared to take their bows." (*Show,* July 1963). The production received international attention and stands today still as a major critical event, artistically and politically.

(24) Letter to Leo Kerz from Erwin Piscator, 19 September 1962. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(25) *Der Stellvertrete* [*The Deputy*]. Two designs for the world premier of the play by Rolf Hochhuth, directed by Erwin Piscator, at the Theatre-am-Kurfuerstendamm, West Berlin, 20 February 1963. Each 55.8 × 35.5 cm. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(26) Blueprint of technical drawing for large crucifix used as part of setting of *Der Stellvertrete,* 1963. Gift of Paul Kerz, 1985.

(27) Two photographs of scenes from *Der Stellvertrete,* 1963. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(28) Photograph of Erwin Piscator during rehearsals for *Der Stellvertrete,* 1963. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(29) Photograph of the author, Rolf Hochhuth, during rehearsals for *Der Stellvertrete,* 1963. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(30) *Der Stellvertrete.* Window card advertisement for the original production, 1963. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(31) *Riverside Drive.* Design for two one-act plays by John Donovan, Theatre de Lys, New York, 1964. 36 × 54 cm. Gift of Mortimer Wimpie, 1982.

(32) *Dance of Death.* Design for the Arena Stage, Washington, D.C., production of Strindberg's play, 1969-1970. 45.3 × 60.2 cm. Gift of Frances and Albert Hackett, 1983.

The inaugural season at Wolf Trap Farm Park for the Performing Arts in Vienna, Virginia, opened in 1971 with a review of 250 years of the musical stage, *Musical Theatre Cavalcade.* The production was directed by Robert Lewis with musical direction by John Green who also appeared as a featured artist. Leo Kerz designed the sets and lighting.

(33) *Musical Theatre Cavalcade.* Design for the first production presented at the Filene Centre, Wolf Trap Foundation, Vienna, Va., 1971. 34 × 45.8 cm. Gift of Frances and Albert Hackett, 1983.

(34) *School for Scandal.* Design for a production at Illinois State University, 1971. 38 × 59.7 cm. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

(35) *Children of the Wind.* Design for the play by Jerry Devine, Belasco Theatre, New York, 1973. 36.5 × 64 cm. Anonymous gift, 1981.

(36) *Ulysses in Nighttown.* Two designs for an unrealized project [n.d.]. Each 24.4 × 31.5 cm. Anonymous gift, 1981.

(37) "Settings designed by Leo Kerz." Design for an exhibition poster [n.d.]. 50.8 × 40.6 cm. Gift of Mortimer Wimpie, 1982.

In the months prior to his death in 1976, Leo Kerz was at work designing sets for Sarah Caldwell's Boston Opera Company production of *The Triumph of Honor, or, the Rake's Reform,* but the project was incomplete at the time of his death.

(38) Four preliminary sketches for *The Triumph of Honor, or, the Rake's Reform.* 1976. Each 47.6 × 60.3 cm. Loaned by Louise Kerz.

When Leo Kerz died in 1976, John Russell, writing in the *New York Times,* called him "one of the last surviving links with the golden age of the German theatre that is associated with the names of Max Reinhardt and Erwin Piscator." Along with Reinhardt, Piscator, Brecht, and other fellow artists-in-exile, Leo Kerz has made a lasting contribution to the look and content of theatre in America.

Acknowledgments

Settings Designed by Leo Kerz is mounted to mark the tenth anniversary of Leo Kerz's death in 1976. On this occasion, our deep appreciation is extended to his wife, Louise Kerz, for her vision in keeping his work together and her fine efforts to develop his archives in the Harvard Theatre Collection. Eventually, a full collection will be possible. Our debt of gratitude is owed to her not only as principal lender but as the devoted interpreter of his art.

We also thank other lenders and donors, including Frances and Albert Hackett; Paul Kerz; Leonard Lesley in memory of Anneliese Lesley; Dr. and Mrs. Arthur Okinaka; and Mortimer Wimpie. Finally, indispensable support for the exhibition in the form of grants from the artist's son, Paul Kerz, and, through the kindness of Cecilia de Mille Presley, from the Cecil B. de Mille Foundation have made this tribute to Leo Kerz possible.