

Endless Innovations
Frederick Kiesler's
Theory and Scenic Design

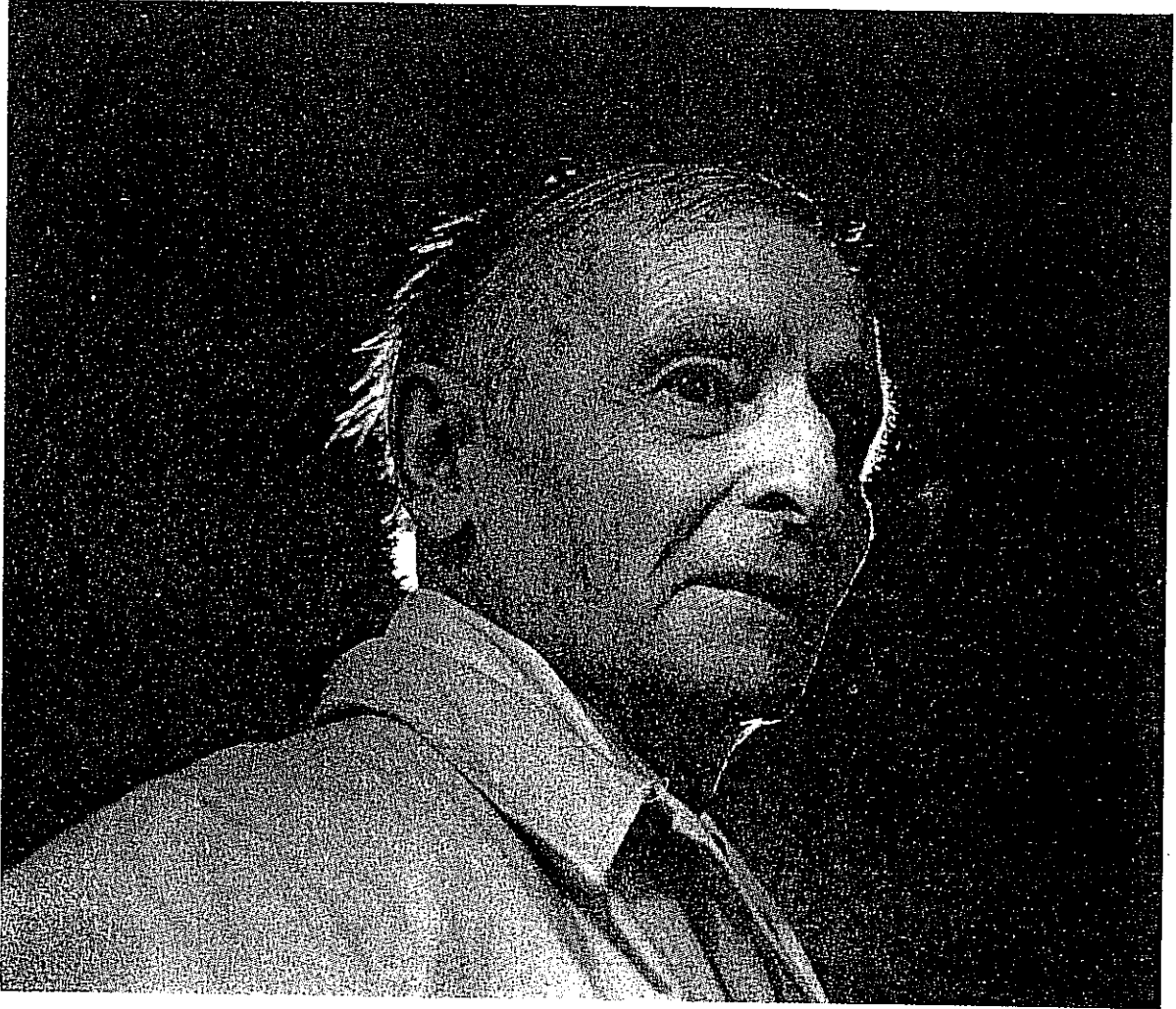
by
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Frontispiece. Frederick Kiesler, Kiesler Papers.



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Foreword

Several years ago, while sorting through an old file of Frederick Kiesler's in a remote closet of our apartment, I came across a thick brown envelope in a section marked "Biographies." The envelope, stained with the ravishes of time, contained, to my surprise, a worn, coffee-colored billfold of the Europe style. Looking inside, I found a solitary piece of yellow paper, folded twice. Slowly pressing out the creases in the fragile paper and finding the typing too faint for the dim light of the closet, I took it to the window for light.

It was at that moment, not knowing how or when the short biography had reached Frederick Kiesler's billfold, that I learned he had been a member of the Austrian State Theatre, from childhood into his teens, and had also organized and directed a children's theatre from the age of twelve. I am convinced the biography was written in Europe before he came to America as director of the International Theatre Exhibition in New York in 1926. As far as I know, during his entire time in America, this information was not to reach the light of day.

What was obvious was his lifelong passion for the theatre, expressed in everyday life and on stages. From what I saw, this passion seemed to express itself as a secret rapport that had little to do with ordinary explanations. All of his pores were open to it, and he never resisted the pull. Once he wrote: "Science might give us very good explanations, but after all, science comes after art, and what has that to do with life's impulses, which are independent, thoroughly independent of man's intellect."

I can remember one spring morning while we were having a late breakfast, he suddenly started discussing the importance of a performer entering and exiting from the performance space. He pointed out how difficult it was to enter a stage alone, compel the audience to care to pay attention, and at the finish to leave the stage. Waving his arms and laughing, he said performance was somewhat like a sandwich—the two pieces of bread were the entrances and exits, and in between was the filling. In his view, the filling was of minor concern. Becoming serious, he pointed out the beginning and end of any creative work, including theatre, represents one's concept, and this to him was the secret of continuity. Going on, he revealed that he

had always been pulled toward composing a choreography and a film.

To my astonishment, he told me he had composed a choreography and structured a film. Long after his death I found both, as working projects, in his archives. There were scripts and many drawings for both. The choreography was entitled "Ballet Massacre d'art"; the film, "Aphrodite's Left Turn." For the film he had carefully worked out shot-by-shot drawings, sound descriptions, etc., and he had selected the cast. Edwin Denby was cast as THE YOUNG MAN, John Latouche as THE CHOIR BOY, Elissa Landi as APHRODITE, and his cat Sing-Sing as THE CAT. The prologue for the film started with:

First man (voice) "Diogenes was a philosopher because he knew how to live. He also solved the housing questions for everyone. You know, slum clearance of the brain and city."

Once, out of the blue, he described to me the sensation of experiencing the magical art of Eleanora Duse. Standing in the wings of an Austrian theatre, he saw her slowly walk out to center stage and stand immobilized in what he called "a silence of overpowering action." He said the Viennese audience was breathless before her monumental silence. He explained to me "Her silence was like the space to make things grow."

Lillian Kiesler
March 1982
New York City

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Mrs. Lillian B. Kiesler for her warmth, understanding and sharing of the original designs, notes and unpublished materials in her possession without which the study would not exist.

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