Members of the Marionetteatern from Stockholm marching toward the Multivision Center with their puppet theatres in tow.

Photo Paul R. Ryan

"Spielstrasse"

1932–1936

The theme of the 1936 Olympics, which was held in Berlin with considerable political overtones, was assigned to the Gruppo Sperimentazione Teatrale. The scenario that reached Mario Ricci* in Rome early in 1972 called for the use of recordings, television, huge puppets, and a chorus to depict that Olympics. When sent to Ricci, the scenario had the official approval of the Olympic Arts Committee. The Italian director (with the aid of two artist friends, Carlo Montesi and Claudio Previtera) set about enthusiastically to create what he hoped would be a controversial piece. The 1972 Olympics, after all, were the first to be held in Germany

*For a documentation of Mario Ricci's ***Moby Dick*** see T-55.

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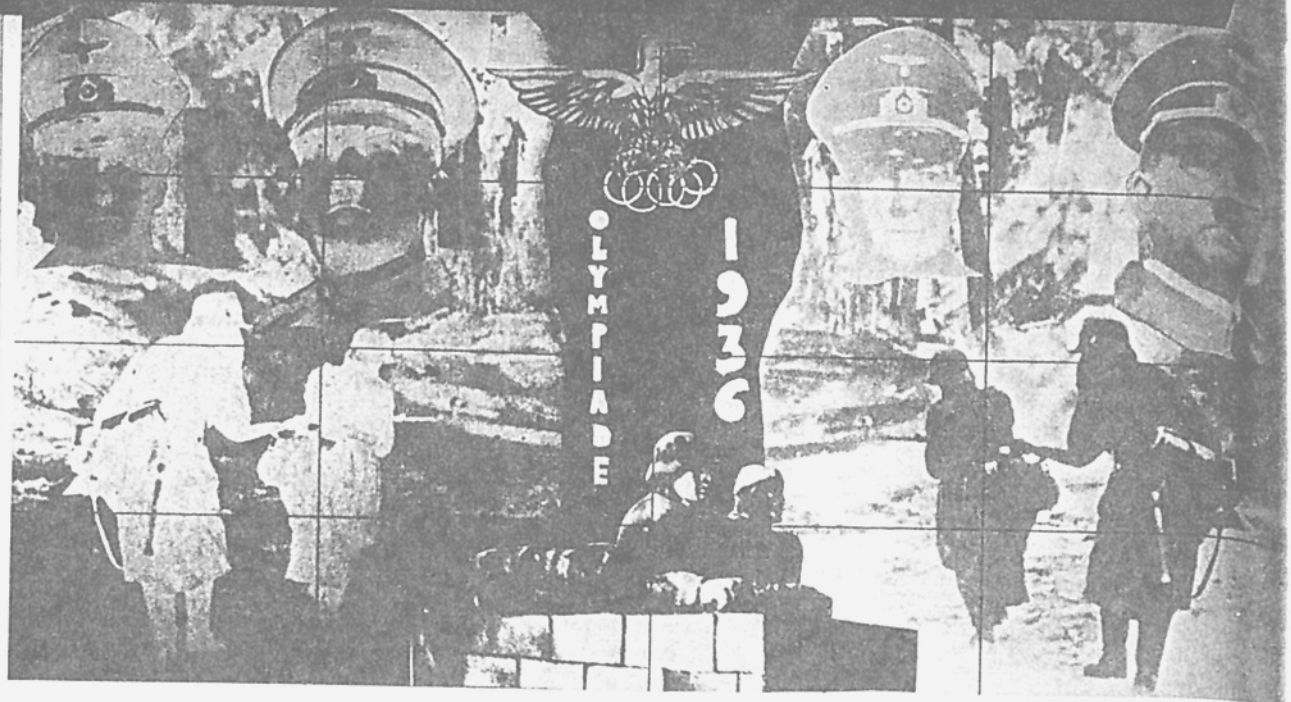

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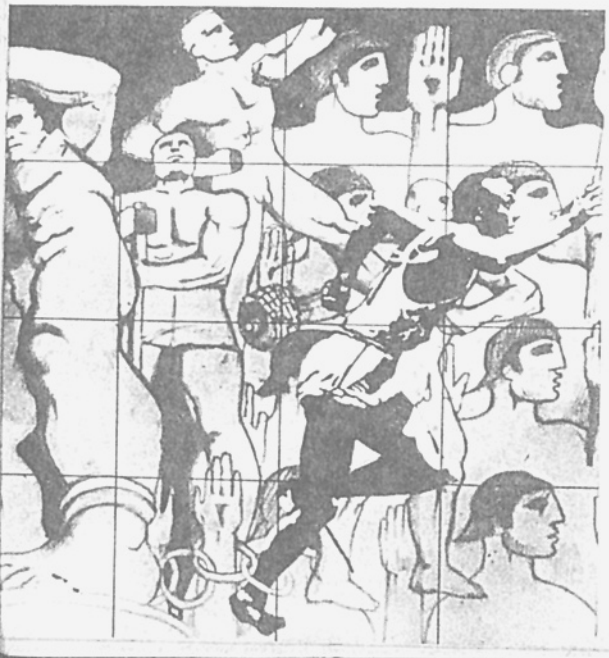
since '36, and a great deal of European attention would naturally focus on the work and its conception.

In the portraying of athletic events, the scenario called for the repetition of such phrases as: "A (Hitler Youth) youngster must be tough as leather, hard as Krupp steel." A puppet of Hitler was to be constructed that could be adjusted to a large or small size, depending on whether the Führer was engaging in table conversation or propaganda. The stage action was to take place against the background of the Leni Riefenstahl film of the '36 Olympics, which is usually rated among the top 10 documentary movies ever made. The piece was supposed to close with "competitions and frantic roaring, interrupted by recordings of Hitler's inflammatory speeches and victory announcements. . . . The spectator will then hear Beethoven's Freude Schöner Gotterfunken, interspersed with the sound of machine-gun salvos and bomber attacks . . . The piece will end in almost total silence, just 'Götterfunken, Götterfunk . . .' "

Ricci was hard at work shaping the clay of the scenario into his own particular

Above and below, sketches for Ricci's conception of 1936 Berlin Olympics, never produced.



construction when a telegram arrived advising him that the Olympic Committee had changed its mind: It now wanted him to structure his piece on the 1932 Olympics held in Los Angeles. The official reason: The Olympic Committee did not want to risk anything that might conceivably cause the East Germans to stage a walk-out from the games.

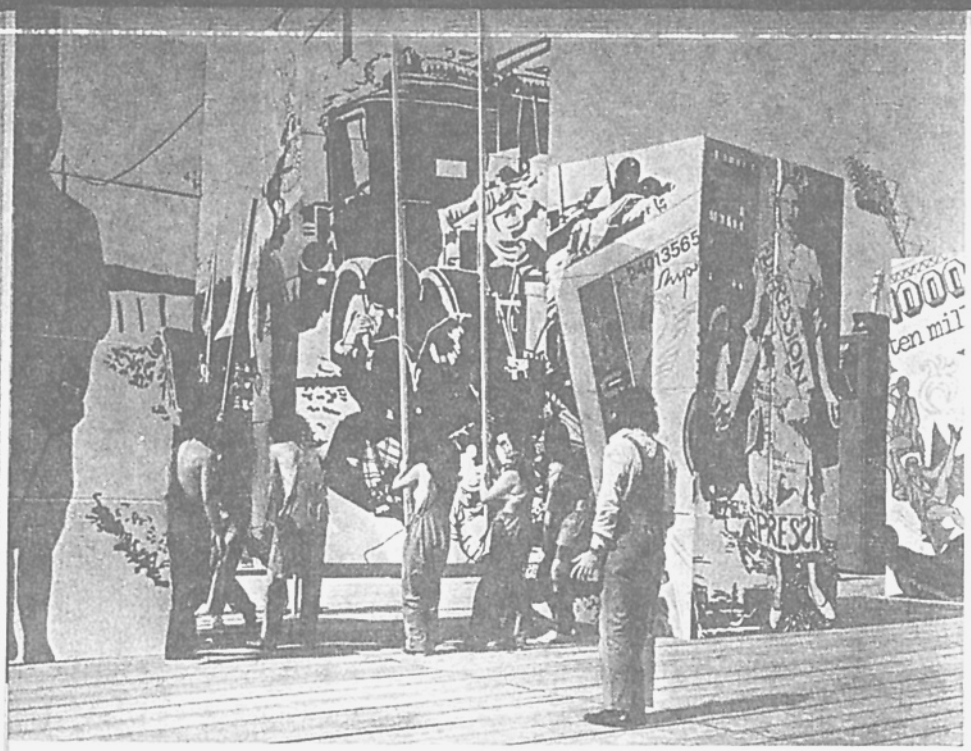
"What could I do," Ricci shrugged, "pull out? It was a great disappointment not to do the '36 Olympics, but we reasoned that it was better to do something than nothing at all. We are finding that futile protests don't accomplish much. Anyway, we took our basic idea for the '36 Olympics and simply applied it to the '32 games. Of course, I had to shift my research. I was helped in my conception by a book written by an American Communist, the name of which I don't remember. It was about a day in the life of a small town—Akron, Ohio. We worked with the idea of the Depression and of gangsters, such as Capone, and breadlines."

Ricci ended up with a piece that was almost totally audio/visual in nature. It was divided into two parts: a labyrinth, and what might be described as "a super-large billboard."

It took the actors—there were 60 in his troupe—considerably more than an hour to construct the labyrinth on the terrace area at the rear of the Theatron playing space. This was because it was made out of 150 white cardboard boxes, each measuring 3½ feet wide by 6½ feet long. Often another group was called on to perform while the labyrinth was being built. The actors, dressed in identical blue overalls, used very precise, almost mechanical movements while assembling the labyrinth. The spectator had the feeling that he was watching a highly drilled worker team. When the labyrinth was constructed, spectators were invited to come down from the seating area and walk through the maze. They were handed fake money (10-million-dollar bills) as they entered. On some occasions, film clips and slides were actually screened onto the spectators as they moved throughout the maze. On other occasions, there was nothing but darkness inside the maze: occasional areas of light and the whiteness of the boxes gave the feeling of a tremendous emptiness and sterility. This part of the piece ended with the actors closing off the labyrinth, from which they released balloons carrying cardboard silhouettes of Roosevelt and other political figures of that time.

In the construction of the "super-billboard," some 60 cardboard boxes were used. The boxes—the same size as those used in the labyrinth—could be set up in different ways, so that when the final box was in place there were two scenes of 1932 visible, one to the audience seated in the Theatron and the other to people walking on the nearby Olympic grounds and on the ***Spielstrasse*** across the lake. These static scenes were a collage of events and figures: On one side of the "billboard," for example, you could quickly recognize the figure of Al Capone and that of Mickey Mouse, plus a bearded fencer and a woman with a sash running from her waist over her shoulder with the word "Depression" on it in large letters. Occupying the center of the "billboard" was a large 10-million-dollar bill with a top-hatted chorus girl in a circle at one side. During the assembling of this part of the piece, songs from the '30's, interspersed with radio news commentary of that period, were played over the loudspeakers. The piece ended with the actors toppling the "billboard" and flattening the cardboard boxes. From the bottom boxes, the performers took out piles of paper clothing that they had made and then invited spectators to come forward.

You might be given a "free jacket" by a very attractive Italian woman in a Mickey Mouse costume, or a "dress" from a lady wearing a potato sack with a



Above, Ricci's group constructing "super-billboard." At right, Ricci watches action.

Photos Paul R. Ryan

shoulder sash reading "Depression." All at once, you were aware that the "billboard" was now "real"; that you were part of it; a new image superimposed on an old one.

Ricci said that when he returned to Rome he would embark on a new piece entitled ***The Long Voyage of Ulysses***. He has signed a contract to become a co-director of the Teatro Citta' di Roma, a new theatre complex being created by the city of Rome with the aid of the Italian government. Two other co-directors in the enterprise are Giancarlo Nanni and Luca Ronconi. Nanni is planning a production of ***The White Devil***, and Ronconi a version of the ***Oresteia*** trilogy.