

## Ronconi's Killing Factory

*A former auto plant on the outskirts of Turin provides the appropriate set for a monumental assembly-line antiwar drama*

By **ROBERT T. ZINTL** TURIN

Viennese idle at café tables that roll past clanking printing presses as newsboys shout excitedly about the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand; later the café tables are replaced by gun carriages and troop trains. Mourners carry gilded coffins through a milling crowd. From high above, Pope Benedict XV drones a prayer for peace, while below a newspaper editor excitedly shakes his

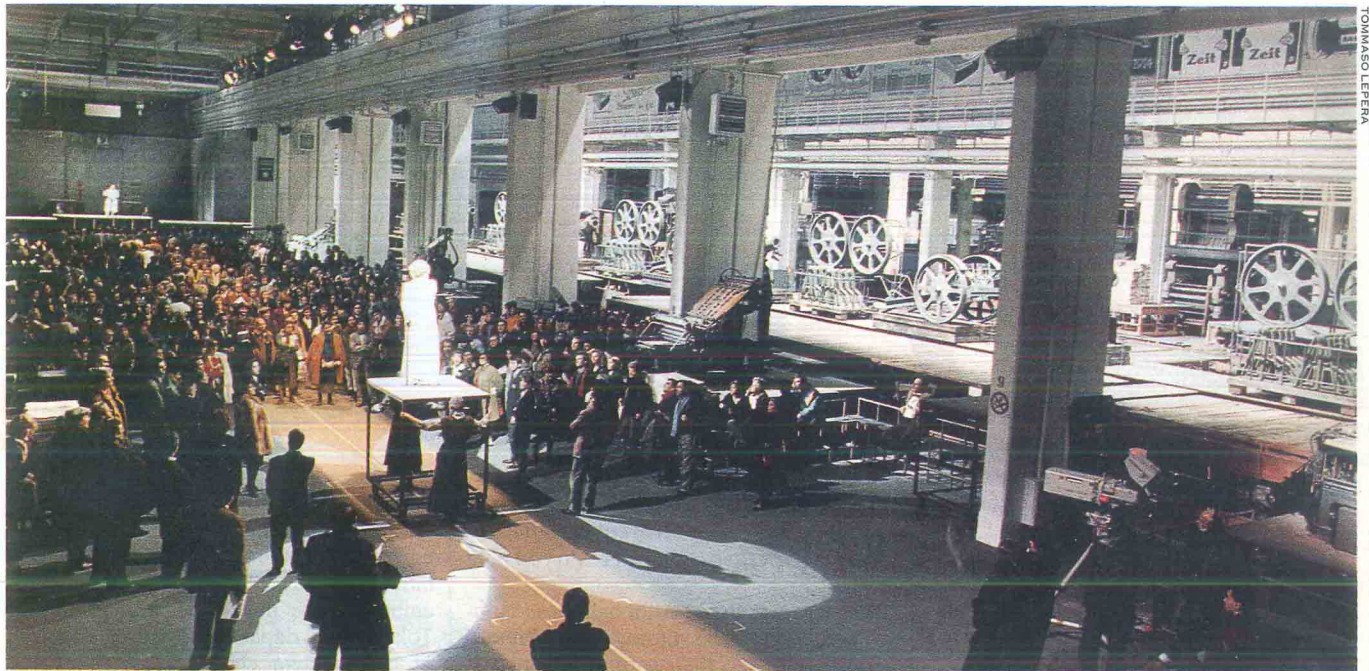
of the Austrian empire as "an immense, sarcastic, maniacal heap of verbal debris." Nevertheless, the work's biting tone and rapid, collage-like sketches have influenced other playwrights, including Bertolt Brecht.

Ronconi brings Kraus' difficult drama alive by staging as many as six scenes simultaneously as the audience wanders among them and scores of technicians push past with actors on railroad cars moving to their next position. "What should have lasted 30 hours, I did in three," says Ronconi. The

murderous system, against an economy that condemns you to a life of harshness, that consigns all hope, even the smallest wish for happiness, to the hatred of nations?"

To re-create the menacing feeling of industrial-age warfare, the Turin theater prevailed on local museums to lend Lino-type machines, steam locomotives and boxcars for the sets. But the real star of the production is the factory. Built between 1917 and 1920, while Kraus was writing his epic, Lingotto was the largest and most innovative automobile plant in Europe. It was shut down in 1983, and beginning next month will undergo conversion into a conference and cultural center, designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano.

Eager to commemorate the factory's



Like the cars that once rolled down the conveyor belt, actors and spectators move through the theater in a cacophonous jumble of action

fist as artillery fire echoes off the walls.

The setting is Vienna during World War I, but the location of this unusual piece of theater is Fiat's vast, empty Lingotto automobile plant on the outskirts of Turin. There director Luca Ronconi and the Turin theater company have staged a 3½-hour happening, with 60 actors playing hundreds of characters who clamber around real locomotives, boxcars and printing presses. The \$5 million production, which ran from Nov. 30 through last week, has been taped for airing on Italian television next September.

The 800-page script of *The Last Days of Humanity*, by Austrian author Karl Kraus, was published in 1922 and had long been considered impressive but unrepresentable. It was staged only once, in 1964 in Vienna. No wonder: Milan's *Corriere della Sera* critic described Kraus' account of the collapse

cacophonous jumble builds to moments of charged irony: a gushing war correspondent exclaims over the "virility" of the troops while, nearby, lonely soldiers dance with each other. At another point, hospital orderlies attempt to teach maimed veterans to salute; across the way, some men are being hanged.

Actors and spectators alike progress along the factory floor, like the autos that once rolled down the assembly line. In the process, the audience becomes part of the show: as the actors speak around and above them, the crowd plays the Viennese populace watching the apocalypse, waiting expectantly for the latest news bellowed out by the newsboys. In a stinging peroration, Kraus' commentator addresses the audience directly, lashing into it for passivity in the face of slaughter: "And you, the victims, why didn't you rebel against this

final days, Fiat asked Ronconi, one of Italy's avant-garde directors, to mount a production in the Lingotto's former stamping room, which covers less than one-fourth of the giant plant. Given the difficult acoustics and sight lines, he chose a play that was suitable to the factory's "fragmented and chaotic" space. The director made no effort to seal off his set from the sweep of the empty plant; even during the play's quieter moments, the walls and whitewashed pillars reverberate with the noise of equipment moving around in the background.

"For Kraus, modern war was the product of a civilization of machines," says Ronconi. "The symbol of a factory is highly appropriate to this play." Kraus' sweeping epic provides a disturbing reminder about what might happen if the 20th century ends the way it began. ■