

STAGE DESIGN

DAVID FINGLETON

A triumph of documentary design at Glyndebourne; style and glamour at Sadlers Wells, but a disappointing *Aida* at Covent Garden.



The delightfully original pay box at the Palau

combination of chair height and the rake of the black varnished bare floorboards. The prompt box and the float trough are very ornate and the pit rail an exuberant essay in wrought iron – yet the proscenium arch is surprisingly unstressed in comparison with many younger theatres designed with proscenium barrier breaking in the brief. The tiers are, of course, shallow and the boxes contain the fruits of a century's exploration of seating ergonomics.

A welcoming theatre: even such intimately fragile Mozart as *El Rapte Del Serrall* survives (if only just) despite the vastness of the house. The Liceo is no theatre for wasting your interval in the bar. It is much more fun to watch the foyers and corridors which reek with historical atmosphere arising from the detailing of every fixture and fitting. Of particular delight are the glimpses of the anterooms to the boxes, each generous in space and individual in furnishing – exuberant temples of the woodcarver's and upholsterer's arts.

But Barcelona's most stimulating house for performances is the 1908 *Palau* concert hall. It boldly embraces every decorative art, particularly those of mason, plasterer, glazier and ceramicist. A straight line is never used if a curve is even remotely possible. Presumably geometric architects dislike it as much as I dislike geometric architecture? *Palau* renewed my belief in the importance of a non-structural decorative approach to theatre architecture.

And as to that performing art which is particularly indigenous to Spain? . . . well, the *Museo Taurino* was closed. I walked twice around the Bull Ring and could not even find a sign to the museum. (Yes, I know that there are two bull rings and I was at the right one, the *Monumental*, and I walked round the other one as well, and I did it during published opening hours!)

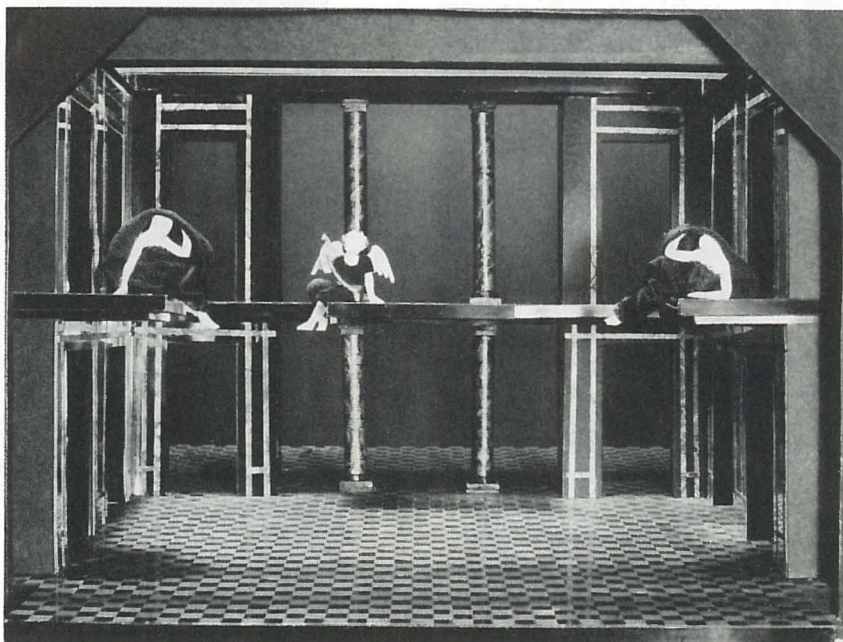
I will continue stopping over in Barcelona from manana to manana until I find the Theatre Museum open and report again. Meanwhile, would anyone passing through that city, please let me know how the builders are progressing.

As Roy Strong makes clear in his authoritative and stimulating essay 'The Rule of Taste' in *Glyndebourne: A Celebration* (Jonathan Cape £12.50), published to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the founding of the Festival Opera, design was not initially Glyndebourne's strongest suit. This could be seen very clearly in the excellent exhibition of design at Glyndebourne over the half century to be found in the opera house's foyer during the festival season. Those original, rather dim designs by Hamish Wilson and Kenneth Green took some little time to give way to the altogether more imaginative work of first Caspar Neher, then Rolf Gerard, Oliver Messel, John Piper, and Leslie Hurry. But from the fifties onwards, although there has naturally been the occasional failure (Erté's *Der Rosenkavalier* was a recent and conspicuous case in point), Glyndebourne's reputation for the quality of both design and execution has been second to no opera house in the world.

It is pleasant therefore to report that this 50th anniversary season has well maintained the level of excellence. Both new productions have benefitted from the sheer quality that sets Glyndebourne apart from other less painstaking opera houses, and both designers were working at the peak of their very considerable powers. For Sir Peter Hall's new production of

Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* he and his habitual designer, John Bury, had sensibly avoided the temptation to set the opera in ancient Rome, and instead had plumped for Venice, the composer's city, in his own period, the mid-seventeenth century. John Bury's elegant galleried setting was thus classical Venetian baroque, the costumes likewise, and Bury himself was responsible for the exquisitely subtle lighting which, combined with his very strong sense of colour and period – costumes were enormously impressive – conjured up impressions of paintings by Tintoretto and Tiepolo. There is no question that over the past fifteen years Hall and Bury have achieved their finest work at Glyndebourne: one only had to see the immensely strong revival of their marvellous 1973 production of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* to be reminded of the consistency of their visual intelligence, and as I write their enchanting production of Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* still awaits its August revival. If only the two men could work at this level at the National Theatre, but conditions must, alas, be rather different there.

Glyndebourne's other new production was their first ever staging of Richard Strauss's *Arabella*, produced by John Cox and designed by Julia Trevelyan Oman, who was working there for the first time. It



Set model – The prologue *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*. Director: Peter Hall, Design and Lighting: John Bury. Photograph Guy Gravett