

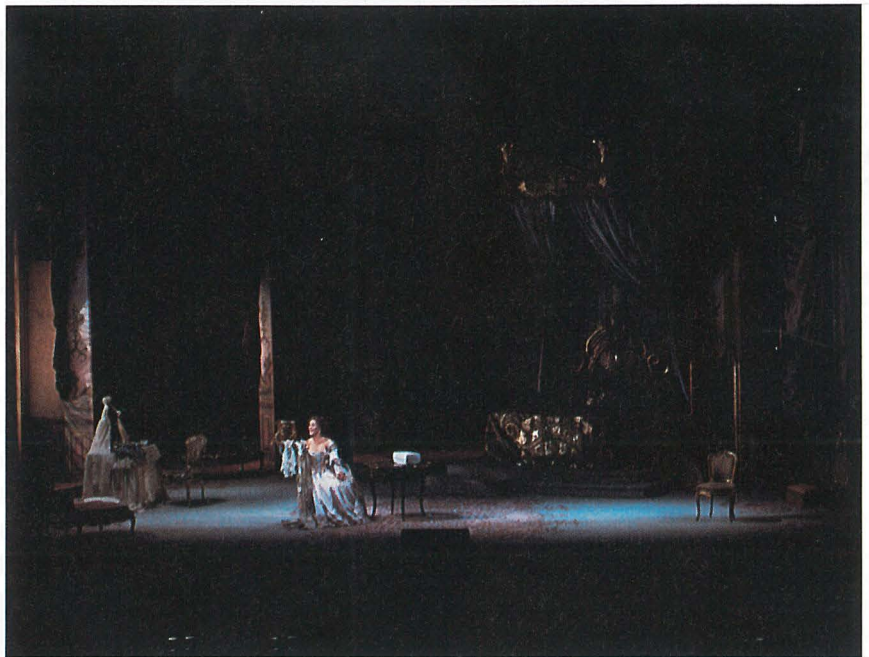
STAGE DESIGN

DAVID FINGLETON

Pretentious treatment of Molnar and Brecht obscures their meaning. A barely credible *Coriolanus* but a rivetting *Phedra*. A theatrically magic *Nutcracker* from the Royal Ballet and a just as memorable *Rosenkavalier* from The Royal Opera.

The managements of both the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company are regularly to be heard complaining that they are grossly underfunded, and thus warning that without substantially increased subsidies they risk massive curtailment of their operations. Looking at their work from the standpoint of stage design, I am all too frequently left wondering whether the first assertion holds any water, and whether the second, were it to happen, would be altogether a bad thing. Judging by two of the three new productions I saw on the South Bank and in the Barbican during the latter part of last year, it seems more the case that the two companies, having acquired large and technically sophisticated theatres, now have an irresistible urge to deploy these auditoria in elaborate and extravagant productions for fear otherwise of being accused of failing to take advantage of them. There seems almost to be a policy of dazzling audiences with 'effects' rather than having directors and designers apply their minds to the true dramatic needs of the plays being performed.

Why otherwise would it seem necessary to change Farcen Molnar's unpretentious comedy *A Play at the Castle*, by way of a 'free adaptation' by the eminent playwright Tom Stoppard, into a cumbersome and costly pastiche of a 30's Broadway musical and to hire Andre Previn to compose, though not to orchestrate, half a dozen ditties to support it? Either Molnar's original play was viable and worth reviving as it stood, or, as this production in the Lyttelton of *Rough Crossing*, as it was retitled, demonstrated, the attempt to turn it into something quite else, with a much larger cast, two of whom never actually seemed to appear on stage, a chorus, and a plethora of obviously very costly sets and costumes, ensured that any cries of impending penury from the National could only be greeted with a somewhat bitter and derisory smile. That said, it would be wrong to criticise designer Carl Toms for what he did. Clearly he was working to a specific brief and his sumptuous and highly elaborate sets aboard S.S. Italian Castle and his mass of exquisitely detailed, admirably in period, 20's costumes were a pleasure to look at and made as glamorous an effect as any West End musical. But when one sees a tacked-on finale that lasts a bare two



The Royal Opera's new production of *Der Rosenkavalier* produced by John Schlesinger with set designs by William Dudley, costumes by Maria Bjornson and lighting Robert Bryan. The Feldmarschallin's grand bedroom in Act 1. Photograph by Clive Barda



Der Rosenkavalier. The set for Act 3 made for some confusion in entrances and exits. Photograph by Clive Barda