



Julia Trevelyan Oman's early 19th century staging for The Royal Ballet's *Nutcracker* made it an enchanting fairy-tale fantasy much assisted by John B Read's subtle lighting.  
 Photograph by Anthony Crickmay



Miss Oman's sketches of Grandfather for The Royal Ballet's *Nutcracker*.  
 Photographs Donald Southern

recent direction and design of Racine's *Phedra*, presented by the small independent Lupton Theatre Company at the Old Vic was an object lesson in both concept and execution, as well as in achieving maximal effect with minimal means. Prowse used a single set, a splendid and vaulted chamber whose walls seemed grey, brown, sepia or gold according to Gerry Jenkinson's highly effective and precise lighting. He thus

achieved a powerful sense of claustrophobia and the effect of classical Greece seen in terms of late 17th century French baroque: just as it should be. A typically Prowse stroke was to have Phedra's own quarters directly below this main chamber, so that her and Oenone's entrances and exits were made through a large square hole containing a double staircase, down-stage left. This ensured a clarity of focus that use of the wings could never have achieved. His costumes were at a similarly inspired level, again allowing Greek and Minoan style to influence Racine's France, the court of Louis XIV. The concentrated effectiveness of these designs was such that one's eyes never left the stage: a formidable achievement and one that is due for a West End transfer later in the year. Don't miss it at any cost.

The Royal Opera House could feel happy with its work in December. Both the Royal Opera's new production of *Der Rosenkavalier*, and the Royal Ballet's of *The Nutcracker* were considerable successes, and both should continue to please audiences for many seasons to come. *Rosenkavalier* is an opera in which designers can all too easily go over the top, but William Dudley's and Maria Bjornson's designs for John Schlesinger's production were both blessedly straightforward and a constant pleasure to the eye. The opera was set fairly and squarely in the Vienna of Empress Maria Theresa with the Marschallin's very grand bedroom in Act 1 having all the space required for the levée, yet remaining discernibly a room, and designed shallowly enough for the voices to be heard. Von Faninal's salon in Act 2 was gloriously nouveau riche and overdone, a sort of galerie des glaces beyond the bounds of good taste in turquoise and silver and very,

very Viennese. There was great mastery of detail too with Faninal's books clearly bought by the yard, his copies of old masters, Etruscan vases by the score, and rather bad classical statuary littered about the place. The third act was less fully achieved: a cross-section of an enclosed, circular 'chambre séparée', with a narrow circular corridor surrounding it, which made for confusion in entrances and exits. I suspect there had been budgetary cuts: the concept was promising, the execution wanting. Nothing wanting however in the execution or concept of Maria Björnson's costumes which were a joy to behold. They were bang in period, bang in class, and, above all, each and every one looked as though it belonged to its wearer. What more could one ask!

Julia Trevelyan Oman's designs for the Royal Ballet's *Nutcracker* did not arouse enthusiasm in all quarters, some of my colleagues bemoaning the production's un-Russian-ness and the absence of the bright garish colours that they had expected. Perhaps they overlooked the fact that Petipa and Tchaikovsky took the ballet from a tale by E. T. A. Hoffman, set in Nuremberg in the first half of the 19th century, a time when of course lighting came from candles rather than light bulbs. One has only to listen to the music to hear how un-Russian it is, undoubtedly Tchaikovsky's most European ballet score. Personally I found Miss Oman's early 19th century German staging to be enchanting, conveying far more of fairy-tale fantasy, as well as the spirit of Christmas, than any production of the ballet I have seen in recent years. As at Glyndebourne in last summer's *Arabella*, Miss Oman's renown as a designer of meticulous historical accuracy was much in evidence. The very endearing Biedermeier setting of the Stahlbaums' sitting room and its truly fantastic transformation into the realm of the Mouse-King were stunningly achieved. The softly candle-lit room with its gorgeous gothic Christmas tree, large dolls' house, rocking horse, bath-chair, exquisite icing-sugar palace Christmas cake, and Drosselmeyer's sinister owl clock changed proportions most dramatically with the help of traps and lifts so that the tree became enormous, the dolls' house was transformed into the Mouse HQ, with Grandpa's bath-chair conscripted as the Mouse-King's chariot: true, and all too rare, theatrical magic. Predictably the icing-sugar cake in Act 1 then became, writ large, the setting for the Kingdom of the Sweets in Act 2, and I for one found its gleaming whiteness altogether preferable to the usual lurid and rather sickly confectionery colour-scheme that we tend to see at this point. John B. Read's lighting was of enormous assistance at all times, wonderfully subtle yet precise, achieving a miraculously candle-lit softness in the first act and a brilliantly glacial effect in the second. Judging by the rapt enjoyment of the children sitting around me, it was clear that their imaginative powers and capacity for visual stimulation are rather better developed than those of some of their supposedly more knowledgeable elders.