

STAGE DESIGN

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Stimulating productions by Royal Opera and Welsh National Opera
☐ Suspended judgement on surtitles ☐ A stylish MIKADO with inspired settings ☐ A fresh look at CAV and PAG ☐ Outstanding set designs, the making of the Phantom.

Despite the gloomy economic outlook for the arts in general, in which opera in particular, as the most costly of theatrical art forms, is threatened with being the hardest hit, this has been operatically an enterprising and stimulating autumn at both of London's major houses. At Covent Garden there has been the first of this season's new productions by the Royal Opera, of Janacek's *Jenufa*, as well as a memorable visit by the Welsh National Opera to present their admirable Ring Cycle, and at the Coliseum there have been interesting and provocative new stagings of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, and those operatic 'terrible twins' *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci*.

The staging of *Jenufa* was in the hands of the distinguished Russian director Yuri Lyubimov, formerly of Moscow's Taganka Theatre, where he regularly displeased the authorities with his expressionistic, idiosyncratic productions, strongly influenced by Christianity, but at Covent Garden both his set and costume designers were British artists who have previously worked with Lyubimov in the West, Paul Hernon and Clare Mitchell. As might have been expected, Lyubimov's production was expressionistic, taking *Jenufa* some way from its Moravian village folklore setting and into a world of more universal proletarian suffering, imbued with strongly religious elements. There was also much use of symbolism, with a movement group employed to enact tableaux during the preludes to each act—scattering autumn leaves, snowflakes and spring blossoms as appropriate for each succeeding season—as well as during the opera itself. The stage was framed on either side by a row of revolving doors, or screens, painted white on one side and black on the other: an interesting idea initially, which subsequently became mannered and tiresome. There was also much play made with the cross, powerfully silhouetted at what Lyubimov took to be appropriate points in the action. Within this controversial framework Hernon's stark set design, with an instantly collapsible or erectable hut at its centre and a dividing rear black flat revealing a white cyclorama beyond, was clear, uncluttered and strongly atmospheric, and Clare Mitchell's naturalistic costumes for the singers, if not her more stylised ones for the movement group, were highly effective.

So too was the strong, largely back, lighting, designed jointly by Paul Hernon and Robert Bryan. One might not positively like this production, nor necessarily feel that it was what Janacek's opera required, but on its own terms it was designed most effectively and made telling use of the stage as well as keeping the eyes fixed upon it.

It needed to do that for there was competition above the proscenium arch in the shape of the Royal Opera's first use of 'Surtitles'. These were projected onto a black graphite screen, 10' wide by 3' high, using white text with a maximum height of one foot and a maximum of two lines at a time. Obviously there is benefit in an instant translation of an opera sung in Czech—though the English was awkward and antiquated—and it was still possible to watch the stage without looking at the surtitles. But the temptation to look up was always there, and to do so destroyed concentration. I am not

convinced that surtitles are a benefit to opera-going: better to do one's homework on the plot in advance and to rely on producer and singers to get the message across in whatever language is my present view.

Earlier at Covent Garden we had been privileged to see Welsh National Opera's Wagner *Ring Cycle*, directed by Swedish Göran Järvefelt and designed by German Carl Friedrich Oberle, with lighting once again by Robert Bryan. This may not have been the most original or visually exciting Ring to be seen in recent years, but the designs had clearly been planned with the exigencies of touring to theatres of varying size and suitability in mind, as well as on an obviously limited budget. In any case a simple and straightforward staging that avoided the technological wizardry of several recent Rings I have seen was in itself to be commended, in that it left one to



Sets and costumes for the Yuri Lyubimov production of "Jenufa" were designed by Paul Hernon and Clare Mitchell. Lighting by Robert Bryan.