

# STAGE DESIGN

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An *Otello* worthy of a great Opera House □ A crowded and muddled *Carmen* at the Coliseum □ A fire engine saves the day at the Barbican □ A modest *Lear* that worked well □ An unfortunate transfer at the National but immense credibility at the Lyttelton.

The Royal Opera's new production of Verdi's *Otello* has certainly been long-awaited. Its predecessor, designed with monumental nobility by Georges Wakhevitch, was first seen at Covent Garden over thirty years ago and did service there until 1982. The new staging had been planned for last January and had to be postponed as a result of Placido Domingo's withdrawal following the Mexican earthquake. The result of the postponement was that the original producer, Sir Peter Hall, had not the time available to rehearse his planned production this year, so he too withdrew. The new producer, Elijah Moshinsky, decided he could not work within Hall's designer, Sally Jacobs', already constructed sets, so these were jettisoned at a cost of over £100,000 to the beleaguered Royal Opera House. All these set-backs and changes of plan are doubtless entirely explicable in the light of the facts, but they scarcely argue for firm and successful management in these precarious days for the arts in general and opera in particular.

Nevertheless when Moshinsky's production of *Otello*, with sets designed by Timothy O'Brien and costumes by Peter J. Hall, did finally take the stage at Covent Garden last month, it is heartening to be able to report that the lengthy wait had been worth while. This a highly intelligent, straightforwardly uneccentric production, skilfully designed, beautiful to look at, and promising successful revival for many years to come. In fact Moshinsky explained to me that the original designs not only failed to assist him with period or location, but would also have required three intervals—like the 1955 production—for scene changes. Instead we have a uni-setting which needs only one central interval and the resulting gain in terms of dramatic and musical tension and momentum is enormous. What Timothy O'Brien has given us is a spacious and noble late-Italian Renaissance setting, framed by Corinthian columns, with a diamond chequered marble floor, a well-sited balcony and staircase upstage right, and a rear cyclorama, left open for the outdoor acts, enclosed by massive paintings, in the style of Veronese, Tintoretto, and Cimabue, for interior scenes. The setting is clearly Venetian in style and 16th century in period, as are Peter J. Hall's acutely diversified, subtly coloured costumes. Robert Bryan's precise, immensely skilful lighting is a great asset



*The Royal Opera's new production of Verdi's Otello by an all-British production and design team. Producer: Elijah Moshinsky. Set designs: Timothy O'Brien. Costume designs: Peter J Hall. Lighting design: Robert Bryan. Photographs: Zoe Dominic and Catherine Ashmore.*



*Maria Bjornson's wrecked car set for the new ENO Carmen. Producer: David Pountney. Lighting: Paul Pyant. Choreography: Terry John Bates. Conductor: Mark Elder. Photo: Zoe Dominic.*