

throughout. The result, if not offering an eye-opening fresh look at *Otello* as in Peter Stein's remarkable staging for Welsh National Opera last year, provides us all the same with a blessedly practical, entirely absorbing production. The set leaves abundant space for public crowd scenes, with the capacity for plenty of movement, and yet works equally convincingly for intimate scenes—the last act is wonderfully claustrophobic. There is a strong and cohesive atmosphere throughout and the single interval means that considerable tension is generated. It is also a production that will wear well, a setting that will not seem mannered and tedious upon frequent revival. In all, this is a highly successful staging of a great operatic masterpiece, worthy of a great opera house, and one upon which the money has been well spent.

At the Coliseum English National Opera have been of late taking rather a different approach to the mainstream operatic repertory. After their New York Mafia *Rigoletto*, shanty-town *Madam Butterfly*, grand hotel *Mikado*, and pit-head *Cav and Pag*, there is now a motor scrap-heap *Carmen*. This may be very stimulating for opera producers, and diverting to the jaded eyes of compulsive opera buffs, but is perhaps less helpful to those seeing the opera in question for the very first time, as must often be the case at the Coliseum. That said, it is also fair to note that when I returned to this *Carmen* for a later performance a full house of ordinary opera-goers was held in rapt attention by it. This *Carmen*, produced by David Pountney and designed by Maria Bjornson, has been updated to the early 1960's and appears to take place in a slum in Havana, or somewhere else in dictatorial Central America. The set comprises an assortment of large, wrecked American cars, interspersed with large piles of multicoloured rags, systematically picked by the chorus throughout the first act. This setting was backed by a huge movie hoarding depicting a stylised *Carmen* having her cigarette lit by reaching male hands. Quite diverting in itself perhaps, but overcrowded and underorganised, with too many children, too many unconvincing tarts, and simply too much extraneous business, so that the thread of the real action tended to get lost. Neither Pountney nor Bjornson appeared fully to have thought things through, so that, for example, at the close of the first act the army truck supposed to carry *Carmen* to prison simply did not have an exit route across the crowded stage. Lillas Pastia's mobile night-club, within the same basic setting, worked better, and in the final act the cars' graveyard, becoming *Carmen's* too, made powerful theatre, but the third act, with the face removed from the movie hoarding and the cars ranged, headlights on, facing us across the back of the stage, was an unintelligible muddle. Costumes were good, especially those for *Carmen* herself, and trouble had clearly been taken over detail, and over Paul Pyant's all white, highly effective lighting. But taken as a whole this seemed a modish, rather than profound *Carmen*, but at least one that did not seem to have cost too much



Bob Crowley's effective Georgian house set for RSC's *A Penny for a Song* at the Barbican also included a nineteenth century fire engine. Accurate period costumes by Alexander Reid. Production by Howard Davies. Photo: John Hayes.



David Hare's production of *King Lear* at the National's Olivier theatre. Setting by Hayden Griffin. Costumes by Christine Stromberg. Lighting: Rory Dempster. Photo: Nobby Clark.



The National Theatre production of *Coming in to Land*, a new play by Stephen Poliakoff at the Lyttelton. Director: Peter Hall. Designer: Alison Chitty. Lighting: Stephen Wentworth. Photo: Frank Herrmann.