

# STAGE DESIGN

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Biblical dodgems in 'Samson' at the Opera House and a successful new 'Barber of Seville'.

At the Coliseum, a superb Vauxhall Gardens setting for 'Xerxes' but not so impressive, the Netherlands design for 'Tristan and Isolde'.

The National Theatre offers two commendable new productions in 'The Road to Mecca' and 'The Government Inspector'.

working model from 1781 which I described in that original Cue article. Oh, and there was something for the lightpersons — just casually standing there, a pair of Pattern 73s and a doublespot with a lamphouse which looked definitely derived from the age of the arc.

Actually, house full of theatre is rather a good description for a theatre institute where the administrative function of a national and international information centre is combined with one of the world's major research collections from which exhibitions are arranged with particularly strong invention in their exploration of display techniques.

The only weakness is the bookstall — however this is probably out of deference to the nearby location of one of Europe's best theatre bookshops which is just a couple of canals away. It is within the Stadtschouburg (City Theatre) building, but entered from the street and open normal shopping hours. Since the potential sales for specialist theatre books in Dutch rather inhibits their publication, this bookshop has one of the best culls of the world's theatre books — particularly in English and German. There are titles in Amsterdam that are hard or even impossible to find in London and New York. But I hope that the museum will gradually get some of their choicest items on to postcard.

The tall thin architecture of Amsterdam's house of theatre provides a sequence of interlinked domestic sized exhibition rooms on three floors. In the 'Een Huis von Theater' exhibition, the house metaphor was exploited on a staircase landing by a large pictorial exterior of the house with peepholes of the diverse theatrical activity within — and surrounded by an extensive collage of photographs, postcards and slides.

In addition to conventional displays of the items of ephemera that record the brief lives of stage productions, Amsterdam theatre exhibitions utilise presentation techniques which strive to recreate something of the atmosphere of a performance moment, or even the fourth dimension of performance time. Slide/tape and video are obvious devices with an increasing role, and Amsterdam is strong in this. But other audio-visual techniques are also used. Such as the presentation of an actor by accompanying a short biography sheet with photographs in various roles showing the width of their range, sometimes with costumes on figures with black-stockinged neutral but be-wigged faces — and with headsets of the actor's voice to accompany one's study of the material.

A major new opera house is on the way in Amsterdam — now that should stimulate quite an exhibition!

It was altogether appropriate that both our major opera companies should have celebrated the 300th birthday of that great adopted Englishman, George Frideric Handel, with major new productions of two of his most notable works during the anniversary week itself at the end of February. The Royal Opera chose Handel's dramatic oratorio *Samson*, last staged there in 1958 in a production by Herbert Graf, designed by Oliver Messel, and English National Opera offered one of his most successful Italian operas, *Xerxes*, at the Coliseum in a new English translation by its producer, Nicholas Hytner. What made their selections even more apposite was that both works had been given their original premieres in London: *Xerxes* at the King's Theatre, Haymarket in 1738, and *Samson* at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden (the first of the three theatres on the Royal Opera House's site) in 1743. Unfortunately there is invariably a problem in staging one of Handel's dramatic oratorios, for they are altogether more static affairs than genuine operas and were never intended for the kind of staging that operatic audiences expect today. But I cannot believe that it was impossible to find a happier solution than the cumbersome, cliché-ridden realisation that we were offered at Covent Garden by producer Elijah Moshinsky and designer Timothy O'Brien. There was no harm in the decision to see the Philistines in bright white light and to plunge the Jews into stygian gloom, and it undoubtedly made sense, in the opening scene, to dress the chorus in costumes contemporary with Handel. Moreover the Philistines' glaringly lit archway contrasted powerfully with the dark wooden ecclesiastical surroundings of the Hebrews. But thereafter the production could not leave well alone and descended to a fidgety meandering of masonry so that one was never able to focus on the music or the drama. Thus *Samson*, in crude biblical dress, was trundled interminably around on a cart while his followers remained immured in a passable reproduction of Bevis Marks Synagogue, though there, of course, the constant removal of furniture is not encouraged. The height of absurdity was reached during the second act when the potentially epic confrontation between *Samson* and the Philistine hero, Harapha, was reduced to a game of biblical dodgems

in which each chased the other around the stage on four wheels. To this misconceived staging were added decidedly anachronistic choreography by Eleanor Fazan and brashly unsubtle lighting by Nick Chelton which reached its climax at the close of Act 2 with a vivid green laser beam which was presumably intended to separate the Jews from the Philistines, but only succeeded in emphasising the wrong-headedness of the production. It may be that all this scenic St. Vitus' Dance will meet with greater approval at the New York Metropolitan and Chicago Lyric Opera Houses, whither it is now bound, but it was certainly not an appropriate way in which to celebrate the genius of Handel in London.

Happily the skilful and stylish staging of *Xerxes* at the Coliseum came as most welcome relief. Producer Nicholas Hytner and designer David Fielding, both richly gifted young members of their professions, saw the opera in terms of Handel's England and then projected it to the England of today, for attitudes have not changed, emphasising the eternal British quest for culture and admiration of things old and foreign. Fielding's superb basic setting was a trompe l'oeil Vauxhall Gardens, adorned with topiary and deck-chairs and presided over by Roubiliac's famous statue of Handel, peopled by culture-vulture visitors imbibing the beauty of ancient relics in glass cases, attending the odd investiture, listening to the music from the bandstand, or taking tea at a baroque soda fountain. There were so many happy touches: the programmes and guide-books invariably clutched, the topiary Sphinx with its pre-echoes of *Aida*, the rocky landscape adorned with a miniature ruined Persepolis, *Xerxes'* famous bridge over the Hellespont, displayed in a glass case and then shattered in a thunder storm. All had abundant wit yet remained true to the spirit of the opera and enhanced our enjoyment of it. In addition came splendidly witty and intelligent costumes, and skilful, highly imaginative and subtle lighting from Paul Pyant, all combining to demonstrate why British stage design, at its best, is so deservedly renowned. The Royal Opera's next new production, of Rossini's *Barber of Seville*, had been acquired from the Cologne Opera and was an altogether more successful affair. The original Cologne scenery designs had been by Ezio Frigerio, with