

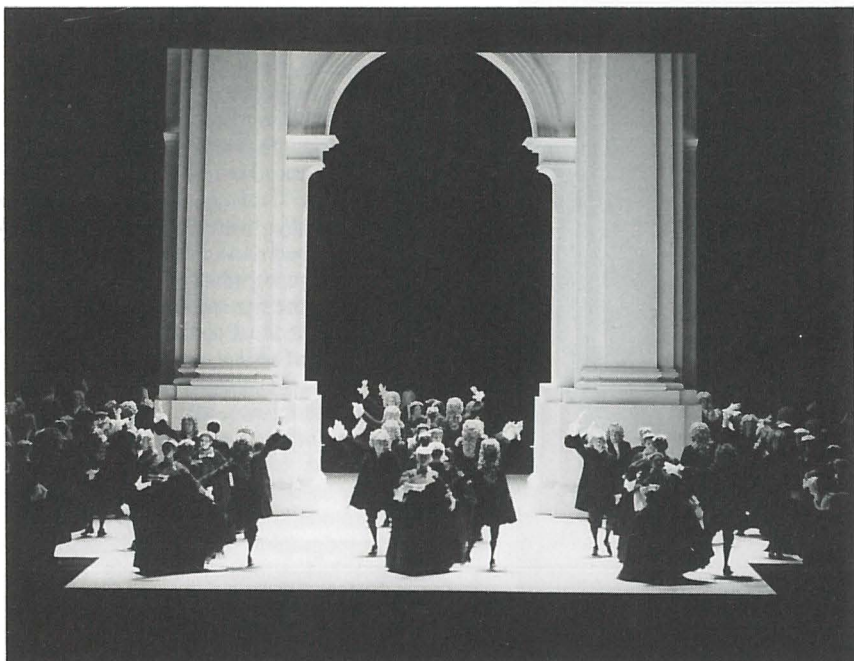
costumes by his wife Franca Squarciapino, and Frigerio's designs were now realised rebuilt for the different dimensions of Covent Garden's stage by staff Production Assistant Peter Davison. The results, if wholly conventional, were attractive, functional, and had an authentically Spanish feeling. First came a dignified grey stone 18th century domestic exterior with, unusually but quite sensibly, Rosina's window for the serenade placed centrally: an imposing sweep of heavily gridded glass above a classical portico. Then for the

remainder of the opera we saw the other side of the window, a spacious, uncluttered stone-floored room, rather meagrely furnished but dignified and allowing plenty of space for producer Michael Hampe's meticulously choreographed action. I did not warm so much to Miss Squarciapino's costumes, finding them rather fussy and over-decorated, and the powder-blue frock for this distinctly middle-aged and dumpy Rosina positively ungainly. Nor were we greatly assisted by the lighting of Hans Toelstede, who had been responsible for the

Cologne original. Its imprecision demonstrated once again how hard it is to work in a 'strange' house. This Covent Garden *Barber* however was a decidedly more successful transfer than English National Opera's staging of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, acquired from the Netherlands Opera and first seen there over a decade ago. Designed by the late Heinrich Wendel and Jan Skalicky, this offered a spiral slipway used in different formation in each of the three acts and was reminiscent of the late Wieland Wagner's Bayreuth settings of the 1950's, without having their powerful imagination. Moreover as these sets had not been rebuilt for London they sat uneasily upon the Coliseum stage, being too narrow and thus needing clumsy reduction of the width of the proscenium. There was one effective coup de théâtre upon the discovery of the lovers in Act 2, and Stephen Watson's precise and imaginative lighting was an asset, but, for the rest, I could not escape the feeling that one of our own promising young director/designer teams, such as that responsible for *Xerxes*, might have achieved something altogether more impressive on no larger a budget.

Over the past few seasons the Royal Ballet seem to have acquired something of an idée fixe about using easel painters to design new ballets. Whilst I am all in favour of giving artists their chance and am happy to acknowledge that recent designs for the ballet by Patrick Caulfield and Victor Pasmore have been laudable, the scheme requires that the artist has an inbuilt understanding of the particular professional needs of stage design. In the Royal Ballet's new staging of Balanchine's *Ballet Imperial* the painter Christopher Le Brun demonstrated all too clearly that he does not. The whole point of this ballet is that it demands glamour and style, and these Le Brun's tawdry, murky, shabby setting with its dimly painted, 'flat' backcloth and limp flags dangling from the wings wholly failed to achieve. Nor were his costumes any better. The girls' had fussily over elaborate fronts and bare backs, and the mens' too were ungainly and distracting, with the general scheme preventing the principals from standing out from the corps de ballet. I fear this version of *Ballet Imperial*, like too many recent offerings from the Royal Ballet, is going to prove difficult to revive, thus demonstrating how careful one should be at the outset.

There have been two commendable new productions recently at the somewhat beleaguered National Theatre. Douglas Heap's setting for Athol Fugard's *The Road to Mecca* at the Lyttleton successfully tackles the difficult problem of evoking an artist and her surroundings on stage. Wisely Heap does not seek to reproduce any of the South African sculptor Helen Martins' work in her New Bethesda sitting room, leaving us to see photographs of the sculptures in an exhibition in the foyer, but the feeling of this remarkable Afrikaans naive artist was tangibly there, as was her joy in colour and candle-light, this last most skilfully evoked by Rory Dempster's highly skilled lighting. More ambitious was the staging of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* in the Olivier by



Timothy O'Brien's setting for Handel's 'Samson' at the Royal Opera House. Produced by Elijah Moshinsky. Choreography Eleanor Fazan. Lighting Nick Chelton. Photo. Zoe Dominic.



English National Opera's 'Xerxes'. Producer Nicholas Hytner. Designer David Fielding. Lighting Paul Pyant. Photo. Catherine Ashmore.