

STAGE DESIGN

DAVID FINGLETON

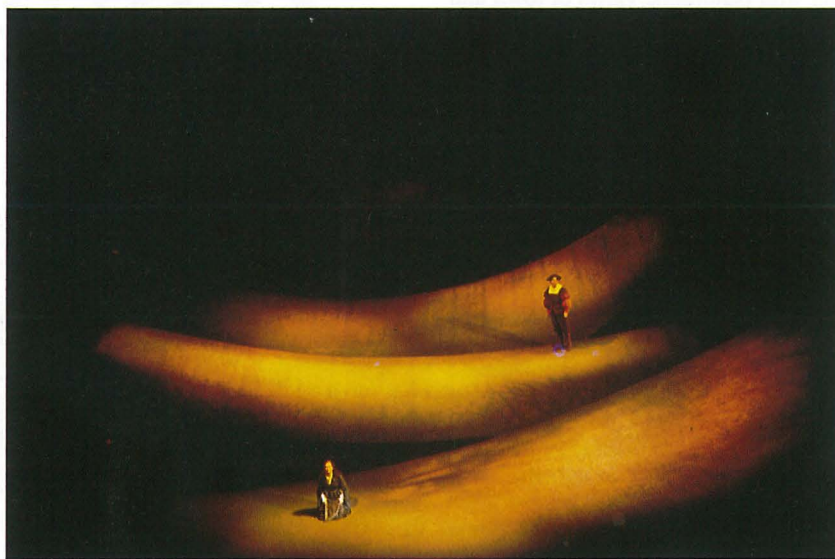
Striking and apposite designs achieve a splendidly integrated *Tannhauser* in Geneva ☐ Truly inspired staging and magical effects on the smallest budget by English National Opera at the London Coliseum ☐ Stage technology runs riot in three expensive new West end musicals ☐ RSC's *Mephisto* somewhat dwarfed at the Barbican ☐ A triumph for Paul Dart's settings for *Three Sisters* at the Bloomsbury Theatre

It is always a pleasure to see our leading stage designers working abroad, especially when that involves a visit to as agreeable and well-run an opera house as the Grand Theatre, Geneva. It was there that Ralph Koltai had designed and lit a persuasive new production of Wagner's *Tannhauser* which had been staged by the immensely promising 22-year-old American, Martha Galvin, previously assistant to Ken Russell in both his recent operatic and film ventures, now resident Assistant Producer at the Grand Theatre. She and Koltai had worked closely together, and will be doing so again for Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* in Hong Kong at the beginning of next year, and achieved thereby a splendidly integrated *Tannhauser* with a strong sense of community, and one which generated altogether more dramatic tension than is customary in this opera.

This was in fact the third time that Koltai had designed *Tannhauser*, though the first in the Dresden version which is shorn of the Bacchanale ballet in the Venusberg at the opening of Act 1. It was here that he was least successful, at any rate with the rather staid Genevois audience. For having placed *Tannhauser* on a striking stage platform of curved, boomerang-shaped overlapping banks, clothed in green astra turf, he flew in

Venus inside a silver ball whose surface had a pink neon-lit female orifice from which Venus's train dropped down at Tannhauser's feet on stage. The orifice then slid open to reveal Venus in shimmering, clinging silver gown, perched upon a platform within the ball. The sexual debate took place thus, without Venus ever descending from her sphere and making physical con-

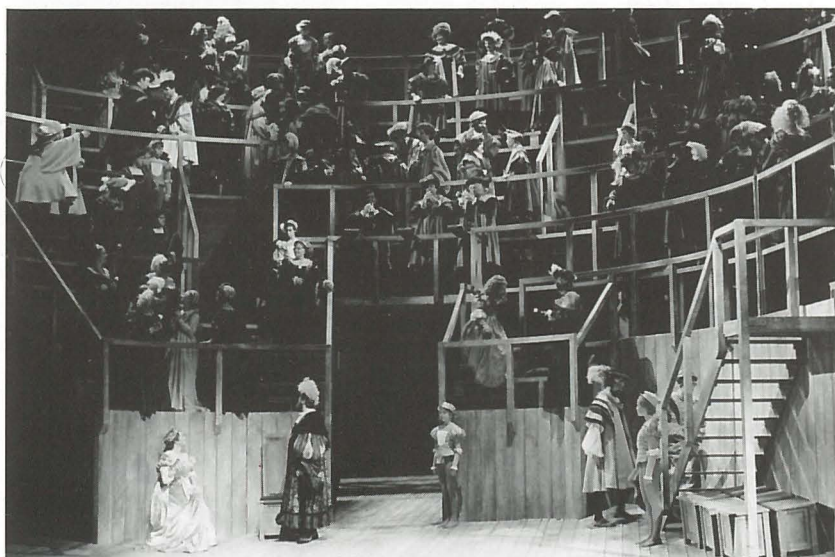
tact with Tannhauser, and meanwhile a series of projections of female secondary, and, I think, primary erogenous zones played upon the cyclorama. The effect may not have pleased the Genevois, but I found it a striking and apposite treatment, and one that held the attention. What it lacked on the opening night was precision in execution, but no doubt that came during the opera's



Ralph Koltai's designs for *Tannhauser* at the Grand Theatre Geneva. Producer: Martha Galvin. Musical Director: Horst Stein. Photograph by Ralph Koltai.



The silver ball inside which they flew in Venus in Act 1 of *Tannhauser*. Photo. Isabelle Meister.



Koltai's terraced structure for the second Act. Annena Stubbs collaborated in the costume designs. Photo. Van Appelghem.