

REIDing SHELF

HOLLYWOOD: LEGEND AND REALITY

is just the sort of book that most of us would be delighted to find in our stockings on christmas morning. It is beautifully produced on a top quality coated paper that allows the illustrations to be presented to a standard which comes close to that of the photographer's darkroom. Most of these illustrations are publicity stills from the film studios and while many of them lack the spontaneity of today's action approach to photography, the technical quality of their carefully prepared moments is high indeed. This is particularly enjoyable in the monochrome stills which depend on lighting for their contrasts.

This is the book of an exhibition, originating at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington for a United States tour. I would dearly love to see it. Having been a sucker for Hollywood hokum since my schooldays, I tend to admire Busby Berkeley rather more than Bertolt Brecht. But then I don't think that I have ever succeeded in disentangling the mythology of Hollywood from the reality of life. (I guess that is why I work on the stage against my logical, if not better, judgement.)

And so I am pleased and comforted by a book that can include Edward Hopper's painting *New York Movie* along with a photograph of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers escaping the realities of the depression by dancing across a 1935 confectioner's concept of Venice. A wondrous collection of images of the movie making process—production, screenwriting, directing, design, cinematography, editing, scoring, special effects and the star power that holds (held?) it all together—gorgeous images accompanied by a spare text mostly constructed from quotes of the movie makers. Did I say hokum? Hollywood a legend? Seems real to me!

Franco Zeffirelli is a director for those (and I am one) who prefer an approach that is based on lavish images and emotions rather than logical analysis of motivational detail. In his words...

I'm always extremely wary of taking opera too literally, of trying for psychological insights through some sort of realism. Any truths that opera may have to teach us seem to me to emerge from the unreality. Short men in armour and large ladies in chiffon singing about ancient Egypt don't make much sense at one level—when elevated by music and grandeur they can absorb us and reveal to us the confusions of emotion and loyalty, the nature of power and pity, that could not be movingly expressed in any other way.

This quote is from **ZEFFIRELLI** an autobiography to which I am happy to apply all the words that his publishers will hope to hear—fascinating, enjoyable, entertaining, stimulating. If you want more such adjectives,

look them up in Roget and I am sure that I will agree.

If I declare that Franco Zeffirelli has been luckier than most, I am not referring to his talent but to the luck that has allowed him to remain alive to share it with us. His survival includes an early search for identity and a couple of firing squads, not to mention a car crash where he was for a time left for dead. But Zeffirelli always does things with style—the driver was Gina Lollobrigida. An early meeting with Visconti might also be classified as luck, but only in so far as it accelerated his career development at that particular point by placing him in a situation for intensive observation and discovery. With such a strong visual imagination supported by drawing skills and an ability to inspire people, success as a designer-director was surely inevitable.

I only lit one opera for Franco but he taught me a lot about integrating light with paint and varnishing with filters. The really great directors draw out the best in their casts and crews. They are totally supportive in a profession which alas has some other practitioners who tend to operate destructively, producing results which are only superficially successful. Zeffirelli handles people with just the right mixture of sincerity and old hokum. His book records much of the flavour of a theatric age now fading, adding to our understanding of the nature of the talent of such great artists as Callas, Olivier and Lila de Nobili. Not to forget that of Zeffirelli himself.

Forty years of **WELSH NATIONAL OPERA** are marked by a plump history book from Richard Fawkes. At two years to a chapter, this is a strict tempo chronology of the development of the company from an idea to an institution. An appendix lists the casts and conductor/director/designer teams for the hundred and forty or so productions, and the text discusses the genesis of each and every one of them together with a summary of critical and audience response. But the book is rather more than just a straight history. It is a story of determination versus deficits. People with vision and single-mindedness founding and developing a company against all odds. A universal story that could be an account of the ups and downs of any successful arts organisation in Britain.

The tale reads well. Richard Fawkes has a happy knack of selecting from contemporary reviews just the right phrase to catch the flavour of the performance. A developing organisation outgrows many of its key personnel from time to time. Fawkes understands this cycle-of-usefulness syndrome and charts very sympathetically how various people's strengths became inappropriate and the way personnel changes were brought about. He is very fair, serious and balanced towards the pros and cons of every such situation. Only once did I detect a slip in his mask of impartiality. Writing of a certain director who threatened several times to leave rehearsals and return home, he adds "The threat was always received by a chorus of offers to drive him to the airport." But then, as I have already suggested, this book is on a rather more universal theme than just Welsh National Opera!

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