



*Jonathan Miller's staging of the MIKADO at the Coliseum for English National Opera. Designer: Stefanos Lazaridis. Costumes: Sue Blane. Choreographer: Anthony van Laast. Lighting by David Cunninghame. Photo Zoë Dominic.*



*Cavalleria Rusticana/Pagliacci was produced by Ian Judge for the E.N.O. at the Coliseum. Designer: Gerard Howland. Costumes: Deirdre Clancy. Lighting by David Cunninghame. Photo. Clive Barda.*

lobby of a colossal grand hotel, its adjacent public rooms still in the process of refurbishment, with such embellishments as palms, grand piano, colossal cocktail glass, and equally colossal horned phonograph, plus a central working fountain surrounded by a circular banquet. Everything is in white, and Sue Blane's equally inspired costumes are entirely in black and white, with a supplementary chorus of maids and pageboys who perform Busby Berkeley-style routines. The frock-coated or military-uniformed Gentlemen of Japan, debby Three Little Maids, straight from the pages of 'Vogue', 'masher', then Tory grandee, Lord High Executioner, and enormous white-suited Mikado—a kind of surreal combination of Sir Peter Hall and Lord Goodman—all combined to focus the work

and to give it a wit, vitality and theatrical incisiveness that it took it far from the realms of pious resuscitation, yet did not destroy the spirit of the work. For this producer, designers, lighting designer David Cunninghame, and choreographer Anthony van Laast are all heartily to be thanked.

ENO's other new production, of Cav and Pag, also shifted both location and period. Indeed producer Ian Judge went a good deal further than that. As well as moving Cavalleria Rusticana and Pagliacci from, respectively, Sicily and Calabria where their librettists set them, to an industrial suburb in Northern Italy, and their period from the 1890's to around World War 1, Ian Judge also linked the two works, as though their composers, Mascagni and Leoncavallo

had actually written them in conjunction. The programme announced that "the action of the two operas takes place over an Easter weekend in an Italian town," and the Pagliacci strolling players were thus to be seen rehearsing during the Intermezzo of Cavalleria, and the survivors from that opera were amongst the audience for the enactment of Pagliacci's grisly final scene. Designer Gerard Howland's setting was a gloomy industrial landscape with pit wheel, overhead gantries and railway trucks, producing an almost Lowryesque atmosphere, and Howland's ingenuity was further to be seen in his turning of Cav's Easter Procession into the stylised interior of the church, with banners and emblems of the Virgin Mary 'flown' for the purpose, and by unfurling a proscenium and drop curtain from the gantry to provide a stage for Pag. I was less convinced by his two sharply angled theatre walls that enclosed the set throughout, not entirely understanding their relevance. Deirdre's Clancy's well-observed costumes and David Cunninghame's precise, well-controlled and largely 'white' lighting also made their effect in a production of strong theatricality. What made me less happy was the relevance of setting to music, for both operas' scores speak of the warm, sun-baked south where high emotions contrast with the sunlight, rather than emerging from dank, dismal industrial surroundings. But at least, on what was clearly a carefully controlled budget, we were made to look afresh at two very familiar works, and thus stimulated by them.

In the world of the West End musical budgets are less controlled, and visual and dramatic stimulation is at an altogether greater premium. Andrew Lloyd Webber's latest blockbuster, at Her Majesty's, *Phantom of the Opera*, is a sub-operatic piece, set in the Paris Opera House itself and with its book taken from Gaston Leroux' splendid melodrama of that title. Alas, neither book, lyrics, nor, most surprisingly, Lloyd Webber's music, achieve any very compelling drama or atmosphere, but Maria Bjornson's superb designs certainly do. Set in 1861, the period of Meyerbeer, Ms Bjornson has created a truly magnificent pastiche of grand opera in the grandest of opera houses. Her use of the 19th century theatre's existing machinery and traps is as imaginative as it is skilful, and the Phantom's subterranean dwelling, across the lake beneath the Paris Opera's stage, was stunningly achieved, though that famous self-destructing chandelier was actually rather less impressive. There was a marvellous authenticity of stage effects, furniture, and decorations, with exquisitely exact costumes, and gorgeous use of those heavy, very French 19th century swagged curtains. Phantom may have cost a bomb, and may look as though it did; but at least the budget has been spent with taste, imagination and skill. What a pity the show itself cannot attain the strength of its designs.