

# STAGE DESIGN

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Poland's principal opera house, the Teatr Wielki (Great Theatre) in Warsaw, first opened in 1833 but was almost totally destroyed in the last war, only its neo-classical, colonnaded facade remaining intact. The theatre reopened in 1965, having been rebuilt to three times its previous size, but retaining the colonnaded facade and portico, and with the positions of stage and auditorium reversed so that it now had the largest operatic stage in the world. Moreover, as well as ample rehearsal stages, workshops and administrative offices, the new building contained on its top floor a small, 250-seat studio theatre. It is an imposing, functional, typically 1950's East European monumental building, with huge marbled foyers and staircases and a 2,000 seat, well raked, rather cinematic main auditorium offering good sightlines, reasonable acoustics, and relatively little charm. Indeed the wood-lined studio theatre, with its remarkably spacious stage and full-sized orchestra pit has noticeably more atmosphere.

Since Robert Satanowski became General and Artistic Director, as well as Principal Conductor, of the Teatr Wielki in 1982, he has offered each year since 1983, the theatre's 150th anniversary, his Days of the Great Theatre, which is not so much a festival as a collection of what he considers to have been the most notable work in opera and ballet during the theatre's past year, thus a sort of shop window for the company's work. The fifth 'Days' in March lasted for 10 days and offered no fewer than eighteen different programmes of opera and ballet during that period. Mr Satanowski also succeeded in enticing fourteen directors of other national opera houses in Warsaw, including the 'intendants' of the New York Metropolitan, the Leningrad Kirov, and Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre, as well as an assortment of dramaturgs, producers, designers and critics. No mean feat.

When the Teatr Wielki was rebuilt the stage was not only the largest in the world, but also very probably the best equipped. Moreover, unlike opera houses in the West, budgetary problems do not bulk large — Satanowski's grant for this year represents a 23% increase on the previous one — and productions can thus be as complex and elaborate as the production team deem desirable. Certainly some of the stagings I saw, notably those of *Turandot*, *Aida*, and *La Traviata*, lost no opportunity to make use of the stage's dazzling array of lifts, traps, and trucks. Indeed there were times that one was left feeling that the equipment was being used simply because it was there, and that the budget might have been better directed at the musical side of the production.

The Teatr Wielki's director of productions is Marek Grzesinski, and chief

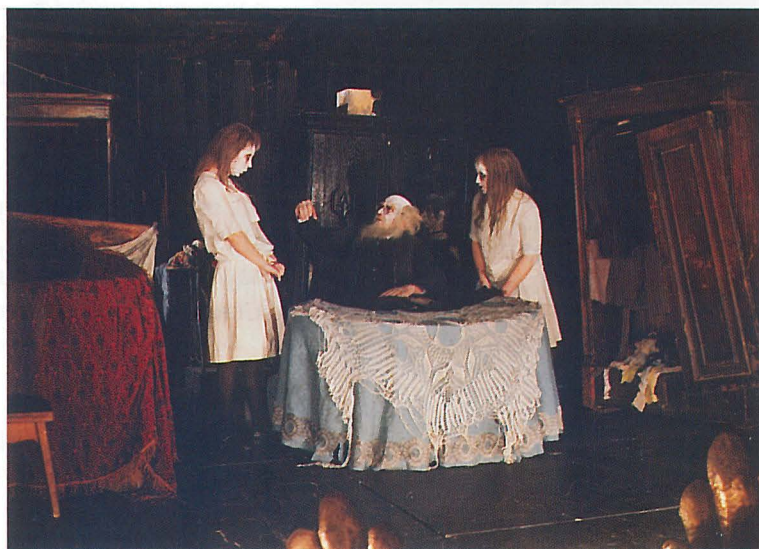
designer is Andrzej Majewski. These two were responsible for the stagings of Puccini's *Turandot* and Verdi's *Aida*, with the newest production that I saw, Verdi's *La Traviata*, being also directed by Grzesinski, but designed by Wieslaw Olko, with costumes by Irena Bieganska. All three operas were fairly heavily politicised, in the East European fashion, with much play being made of the conflict between state and populace in *Turandot* and *Aida*, and of the social milieu of *La Traviata*. *Turandot* had a huge Colditz-like grey fortress at the rear of the stage, its slopes populated by a vast crowd of workers in grey dungarees and peaked caps, all of the imperial court being

in contrast much-bedecked. The problem came with the second act and the great Riddle Scene. Here, where a monumental scale truly is required, the lifts and traps sprang into action, the castle was obscured, the ceiling lowered, and the scale diminished so that we found ourselves watching little more than a run of the mill court-room drama: very disappointing. Yet come act three and Ping, Pang and Pong's temptations of Calaf to divulge his name, an entire red-lit street with floozies sitting in shop-windows sprang up on a lift, at a cost of who knows how much, for a two-minute scene.

Similarly in *Aida*, having watched opening scenes on the grandest scale, with body-stocking lovelies swimming in the Nile at the front of the stage, and its vast depth fully deployed behind them, when we reached the 2nd Act Triumphal Scene, which really does need space for that March, a huge golden frieze of mummies, with head holes provided for the chorus, was trundled right



Verdi's *Aida* at Warsaw's Teatr Wielki. Director Marek Grzesinski. Designer Andrzej Majewski. Photo: Juliusz Multarzynski.



The Studio Theatre at the Teatr Wielki staged Zbigniew Rudzinski's *Mannequins*. Director Marek Grzesinski. Set designs by Janusz Wisniewski. Photo: Jacek Gilun.