

STAGE DESIGN

DAVID FINGLETON

Hansel and Gretel move into a 1950's suburban housing estate earning full marks for a stimulating new staging at the London Coliseum □ A lavish and luxurious production of *L'Italiana in Algeri* with many pleasing effects □ In a five hour marathon at the Olivier *Country Mania* provided outstanding sets, costumes and lighting □ The Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet and a staging which suited the work and the company.

It has become something of a fad at the London Coliseum that English National Opera producers should update and generally re-examine the operas that the company stages. Thus in the past year or so, to name but a few, we have seen Jonathan Miller's 1950's New York Mafia setting of Verdi's *Rigoletto*, his transference of *Tosca* from the Rome of the Bourbons in 1800 to that of Mussolini in the 1940's, Rossini's *Moses* brought forward from the Old Testament to the State of Israel, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci* set not in Italy's deep south but at a pithead in the industrial North, and now Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel* removed from Grimms' fairyland to an English housing estate in the grim early 1950's.

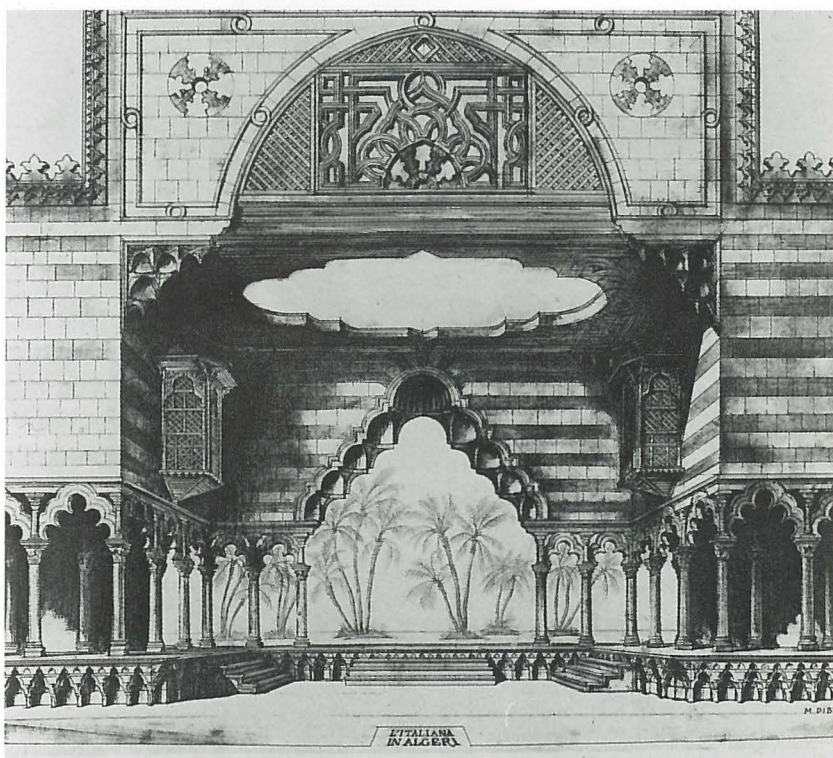
Some of these new-look productions have worked better than others, and I am bound to say that when I heard advance rumour of what was about to be done to Humperdinck's traditional Christmas favourite, I feared the worst. I need not have done so: David Pountney's entirely untraditional staging of the old favourite, brilliantly designed by Stefanos Lazaridis, remains true to the spirit of the opera – the important thing – presents it in terms that make it more, rather than less, intelligible and meaningful, and thus offers highly stimulating and satisfying operatic entertainment.

The overture is played, tabs up, before a skilfully modelled tableau of meagre, boxy houses on a typical London suburban housing estate, surrounded by urban detritus. Then, from the centre of the stage, a fully constructed set rears up and settles into place. It is the kitchen of one of the houses on the estate, in an advanced stage of poverty and neglect, and is of course the home of Hansel, Gretel, and their parents. There is an abundance of remarkably accurate period detail: not only were the gas cooker and unwieldy old 'fridge spot on, so too were smaller details such as the kitchen scales, the radio in bakelite case, the kettle and the crockery. Equally precise and accurate were Lazaridis' costumes for the two children and their parents, even the copy of the *Daily Herald* brought on by father, and his bottle of gin, were correctly 50's, redolent of that age of austerity that followed victory in 1945. It is this kind of attention to detail, as in Patrick Robertson's setting of Dr Miller's *Rigoletto*, that helps

to make an opera's staging in a changed setting a success. The Pountney/Lazaridis handling of *Hansel and Gretel* continued on an equally high level. When the children left to pick strawberries they went not to the woods, but to the local recreation ground, the kitchen having slid back into the stage, where, amidst urban squalor, tramps and winos slept rough on park benches. The wicked witch turned out to be their previously shabby and defeated mother, now smartly decked out in the 'New Look', and when she took them to her home director and designed pulled their master stroke, for it turned out to be the family kitchen again, but now put to sparkling



English National Opera's *Hansel & Gretel* at the London Coliseum. Producer: David Pountney, Design: Stefanos Lazaridis, Lighting: Chris Ellis. Photo: Bill Rafferty.



Model of set design for Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri* by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle.