

rights, and with red and white checked gingham (of course) attached to every conceivable surface. This was a production in which everything, for once, *worked*, and thus it both arrested the attention and led to an enhanced appreciation of the opera. Full marks to Pountney, Lazaridis, and to impeccably precise lighting designer Chris Ellis for their mastery of both concept and mechanics, and for their scrupulous attention to detail.

At the Royal Opera House Christmas and New Year productions were more conventionally staged, with a newly designed version of Ashton's ballet *Cinderella* followed by an imported new production of Rossini's comic opera *L'Italiana in Algeri*. The Royal Ballet's previous staging of *Cinderella* had costumes designed by David Walker — Henry Bardon was responsible for the sets — and this time round Mr Walker was the designer of both. He gave us pleasing, conventional, well detailed settings which allowed ample space for the dancers, though personally I would have welcomed a little more sparkle and grandeur in the ballroom and final scenes. As was to be expected, David Walker's costumes were up to their usual, meticulously detailed standards, and the production as a whole is a highly effective one for a popular classic and will no doubt continue to please Covent Garden audiences for many seasons to come.

The Royal Opera's staging of Rossini's *Italian Girl in Algiers* was shared with the Vienna State Opera, where it had first been seen last Autumn in Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's production. He was apparently too busy to come to London to direct his staging and left matters in the hands of his assistant, Sonja Frisell, but presumably his designs were the same at Covent Garden as in Vienna, and here were skilfully and precisely lit by Robert Bryan. Ponnelle is a director and designer who believes that opera should above all entertain and be enjoyed, and, as well as stage productions, he has presented many operas with much success on television. Not for him then the challenging or the controversial, rather the stage picture that pleases, even dazzles, the eye, and helpfully eases the action along. So here we had an attractive, brightly coloured, strongly rococo Algerian harem, framed and roofed, and containing many an audience-pleasing effect, such as the sinking of Isabella's boat, on the horizon, by cannon shot in Act 1, and its departure, in a much larger version under full sail, with Isabella and her lover aboard, in the final scene.

There was nothing more challenging than the fact that he put the European visitors into late 19th century costumes and used something closer to *commedia dell'arte* for the Bey and his court, with the chorus of eunuchs in squidgy face masks and with false, bare, protruding stomachs. It was all very easy on the eye, and attractively undemanding; perfectly all right if you happen to share Mr Ponnelle's evident view that opera is a lavish and luxurious art form that should not unduly tax the intellect.



*L'Italiana in Algeri* in performance at the Royal Opera House. Producer Sonja Frisell, Lighting by Robert Bryan, Photographs by Clive Barda.



The Royal Ballet's newly designed version of Ashton's *Cinderella* by Prokofiev. Sets and costumes by David Walker. Photo Leslie E. Spatt.