

JOHN NAPIER DESIGNS INTIMATE MUSICALS AND MEGA-SPECTACLES

Saigon Revisited

BY MICHAEL ROMAIN

John Napier admits that he rarely uses much scenery when designing for theatre or opera. But his design for *Miss Saigon* (left; model, right) is different — “the wings of the theatre are absolutely jammed with the stuff,” says Napier. The stage is relatively simple, but Napier says that “underneath is an underground mass of hydraulics, pipes, and switches. It’s pretty complex down below!”

John Napier admet utiliser rarement de nombreux décors quand il crée pour le théâtre ou l’opéra. Pourtant ses décors pour Miss Saigon sont différents (à gauche; maquette à droite). “Les coulisses du théâtre sont pleines à craquer,” dit Napier. Le plateau est plutôt simpliste mais Napier dit, “un labyrinthe souterrain est bourré d’hydrauliques, de tuyaux et d’interrupteurs. Et c’est assez complexe, là dessous!”

John Napier räumt ein, dass er kaum ein Bühnenbild gebraucht, wenn er für Theater oder Oper designet. Aber sein Design für *Miss Saigon* (links; Modell, rechts) ist anders — “die Gassen des Theaters sind absolut vollgestopft mit Dingen,” sagt er. Die Bühne ist relativ einfach, aber Napier sagt, dass “darunter eine unterirdische Masse von Hydraulik, Röhren und Schaltern ist. Es ist ziemlich komplex da unten.”

“People keep accusing me of ripping theatres apart,” protested John Napier. “That is entirely untrue — I have never ripped a theatre apart in my life!” Napier’s designs have, nevertheless, shattered audience preconceptions of theatre space, often breaking down the dividing line between stage and auditorium in spectacular fashion with shows such as *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Cats*, and *Starlight Express*, realigning the whole spectator/performer relationship.

His latest project, though, *Miss Saigon*, is a much more conventional piece of work — operatic even — requiring a very different kind of dynamic than previous mega-musicals.

A love story set against the fall of Saigon in 1975, *Miss Saigon* is a new musical from the creators of *Les Misérables*, Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg. Directed by the prolific Nicholas Hytner, with sets by Napier, lights by David Hersey, costumes by Andreae Neofitou, and sound by Andrew Bruce, it opened at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane on 20 September.

When he began thinking about his designs for the show, Napier had to take into account the unique atmosphere of Drury Lane, which for the past 40 years has generally housed spectacular musicals, as well as the building’s vast structure and 2,238 seats. “I had to respond to its scale, and work within the framework of its elegant neo-classical architecture. The environment inevitably affects the design style. You can’t, for example, put a postage-stamp set onto the Drury Lane’s large stage. I love doing intimate, small-scale work, but it has to be in the right venue. It’s not that you have to fulfill glossy, tacky expectations when you work at Drury Lane. What you have to do is to deliver in a bigger way, so it can reach to every seat in the house.



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